



Hope

Orlan Orphans, Book 9

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIRSTEN
OSBOURNE

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Hope

Orlan Orphans Book 9

Kirsten Osbourne

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About the Author

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Chapter 1

Hope Sanders emptied a box of cotton balls into a large glass jar on the counter. She used a clean rag to wipe down the exam table and the medical instruments on a tray nearby, then peeked out the window. It was another dry, hot summer's day in Nowhere, Texas. Ever since she and her sisters had been shipped to Nowhere from New York several years earlier, she had loved the steady Texas climate. She would have loved to go for a walk, but she had plenty of work that would keep her inside as the assistant to Dr. Iris Harvey.

Hope's adoptive family and Dr. Harvey were longtime friends. Edna Petunia, the eccentric old woman who had opened her home to Hope and her fellow orphans, had worked for the doctor when she was still Iris Sullivan of Seattle. Edna Petunia and Iris had traveled together from Seattle to Texas because as a woman, Iris was unable to practice medicine in Seattle. Surprisingly, both of them had found love right here in Nowhere. Edna Petunia met and married a man she found in the woods, Cletus Sanders, who turned out to be a wealthy homeowner. Although she and Cletus were both advanced in years, Edna Petunia had always longed for a house full of bastard orphans. When the housing plans for Hope and her sisters fell through, Edna Petunia and Cletus agreed to take them in as their adoptive children. Iris, on the other hand, had met Francis Harvey at work. He was initially skeptical of a woman doctor, but she proved herself to be more than worthy of the town's medical needs. Francis had been widowed years earlier and was raising three daughters on his own, so meeting Iris had been a godsend. They'd been married within the year and now had even more children of their own.

Although Dr. Harvey was a married woman, there was so much demand in Nowhere for a medical doctor that she still worked. Edna Petunia was no longer able to help Dr. Harvey because her household duties were too great. Although she no longer had all fifteen orphans at home—eight of them had married off and begun families of their own—she had many responsibilities maintaining Cletus's enormous home, which he'd inherited from his wealthy parents. Since Edna Petunia had stopped working, several of the orphans had taken turns

stepping in to fill her shoes with Dr. Harvey.

Hope enjoyed her work at the doctor's office. Almost everyone in town came to see the doctor eventually. She had tried working in the mercantile, which was owned by her sister Ruby and brother-in-law Lewis. But that hadn't been a good match for Hope's temperament. Hope always said exactly what was on her mind. Ruby and Lewis had a saying that the customer was always right, but Hope disagreed, and she was direct when she felt that a customer was wrong. That arrangement had been short-lived.

Hope had also tried to work at the local school, assisting the elementary teacher. That job had not been a good fit for Hope's spirited attitude, either. She often felt like the teacher did not know what she was doing, and Hope would tell her that.

Though Edna Petunia and Cletus had enough money that none of the girls needed to work for wages, they strongly believed in the value of hard work and never wanted the girls to be idle. As a family, they decided Hope would help Edna Petunia out around the house. That had worked for a while, but both women were incredibly blunt. Soon, the huge house just wasn't big enough for the both of them.

That was how Hope had ended up helping out at Dr. Harvey's. To her surprise, Hope found that she loved her new job. Medical care was difficult, and there was no time for flowery language or false cheer. It was important to Dr. Harvey and her patients that Hope be direct and forthcoming, two things that came naturally to her.

Hope heard the front door creak open, and she looked at the clock in the small examination room in surprise. It was barely twelve o'clock, and the next patient wasn't scheduled until one o'clock. She had planned to eat her lunch after she finished cleaning the exam room, but that was going to have to wait. Annoyed, she went out to the front room of Dr. Harvey's office.

A striking man in a suit stood over Hope's desk, staring at her notebook.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Hope put her hands on her hips.

The man straightened up and offered a hand. He was even more handsome when he was staring right at her. He had white, evenly-spaced teeth and warm, friendly eyes. "I'm Stephen Bennett, Dr. Harvey's nephew."

Hope eyed his hand suspiciously for a moment. Dr. Harvey hadn't mentioned anything about a nephew coming to visit. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to train under Dr. Harvey. She said the town could use another doctor, and I need to complete my medical training." Stephen held up the medical bag he was carrying.

Hope was skeptical. "Dr. Harvey didn't mention anything to me. You'll need to wait outside until she's back."

Stephen looked surprised at Hope's harsh tone. "She told me to meet her here when I got to town. I'm going to stay with her and her family, but she said it would be easier to meet her here."

Hope opened the door and gestured to the porch of the small medical office. "That's fine, but you'll need to wait outside."

"I have the letter from my aunt somewhere in here!" Stephen set his bag down on the desk and began riffling through it. "Please, I've just arrived here from Seattle."

"I'm not surprised. Your suit is all wrinkled." Hope was matter-of-fact.

Stephen broke out into a grin. He hadn't expected this beautiful woman to be so blunt.

"Outside," Hope repeated.

Stephen closed his bag, sighed, and nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He marched outside and sat down on one of the rickety wooden chairs Dr. Harvey kept outside so people could wait for their relatives while they went through delicate appointments or procedures.

Hope tried to focus on her duties inside, but she found herself distracted by the gentleman on the porch. Nowhere was a small town, and she knew all the young men who lived there quite well. She wasn't sure if she could trust this new man, but she was certain he was right about one thing. He was new to Nowhere. Hope knew that Dr. Harvey and Edna Petunia had both lived in Seattle before moving to Nowhere, so the man may have been telling the truth. But she preferred to wait until Dr. Harvey was back so she could be certain.

She didn't have to wait long. She heard Dr. Harvey talking to Stephen on the porch and decided to open the door again to find out if the handsome stranger was telling the truth.

Dr. Harvey put a hand on Stephen's back. "Hope, I'd like you to meet my nephew, Dr. Stephen Bennett."

"Pleased to meet you, Hope." Stephen extended his hand to her once again, staring deep into her eyes.

Hope accepted his hand this time. She felt a jolt as soon as his warm hand touched hers. "Nice to meet you, too." She turned to her employer. "Why didn't you tell me he was coming?"

"I'm sorry, Hope. With the children and preparing for the big church dinner and how busy I've been around here, it slipped my mind. I should have told you I was taking on an apprentice." Dr. Harvey looked at Hope apologetically.

Hope smiled. "It's not a problem, Dr. Harvey. I understand. It has been busy, and I'm sure it will be nice to have an extra set of hands to help around here."

“Thank you, Hope. I appreciate everything you do around here. Without Hope, there’s no way I’d be able to see as many patients as I see in a day, Stephen.” Dr. Harvey gestured for Stephen to follow her inside. Hope held the door open for the others, then walked inside as well.

“There’s not much space in here, but we make do with what we have. You and Hope will have to share a desk. Most of the time, you’ll be in the exam room shadowing me, then soon start seeing patients on your own.” Dr. Harvey pointed to the various areas around the small building.

Stephen nodded in Hope’s direction. “I supposed we’ll be seeing a lot of each other, then.”

“Just try not to get in my way,” Hope told him calmly. “I’m very busy.”

Stephen suppressed the urge to laugh loudly. This woman was so honest and direct she was almost rude, yet he could tell her intentions weren’t mean-spirited. She also was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He found himself wishing that he could take her out for a picnic or to a restaurant for dinner.

Dr. Harvey smiled. She could see sparks flying between her nephew and her assistant. She hoped that they would find a way to work together without driving each other—or her—crazy. Though she hadn’t admitted it to anyone, Hope was the best assistant she’d had since Edna Petunia. Though the older woman had many odd behaviors and was highly unpredictable, she was a loyal and steadfast assistant. Each one of Dr. Harvey’s patients knew Edna Petunia’s heart was in the right place. The same was true with Hope. She could be a little abrupt at times, but everyone knew that she was doing her best to be helpful to the busy small-town doctor.

Dr. Harvey went into her small office at the back of the building before her afternoon appointments. It was the size of a small closet, but it was where she did her reading and paperwork at the end of the day.

Stephen looked unsure of what to do.

“You can sit over there. You’ll be out of the way.” Hope pointed to a small stool in the corner. Stephen gratefully walked over to it and took a seat. He pulled a book out of his bag and began to read.

A few minutes before one o’clock, Mr. William Parsons entered the office. “Hello, Hope!” Mr. Parsons called. He had started to see Dr. Harvey when she first arrived in Nowhere due to his terrible headaches. He sometimes was too sick to get out of bed, which had been devastating to his small farm and his family. Now he saw Dr. Harvey once a month and she was able to treat his headaches so he was able to work daily on his farm.

“Hello, Mr. Parsons.” Hope didn’t bat an eye. “You’re behind in your payments.”

Stephen looked up from his book and frowned.

“It’s been a slow year at the farm. I have part of what I owe Dr. Harvey now, and I’ll bring the rest next month,” Mr. Parsons explained.

“You said that last month,” Hope pointed out.

“I know, and Dr. Harvey has been so good to me and my family. Please understand, I’m not trying to take advantage. I’ll have the money by next month—no matter what,” Mr. Parsons said, glancing at Stephen warily. He wasn’t sure who the unfamiliar man was, or why he was watching everything that went on in the office.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I’m sure whatever payment schedule you work out will be just fine with my aunt. I’m Dr. Stephen Bennett, and I’ll be apprenticing with Dr. Harvey.” Stephen offered Mr. Parsons his hand, and the older man shook it heartily.

“Oh, thank you, Dr. Bennett. Pleasure to meet you. This means a lot.” Mr. Parsons looked tickled.

Hope glared at Stephen, but didn’t say anything. She turned to Mr. Parsons. “I’ll let Dr. Harvey know you’re here.” She walked to the back of the office and knocked lightly on Dr. Harvey’s office. “Mr. Parsons is here.”

“Thanks, Hope!” Dr. Harvey called. She walked out to the front room area and greeted Mr. Parsons warmly. “So good to see you, William. I see you’ve met my nephew, Stephen. He’ll be helping me... and who knows, one day he may take over this practice.”

“Hello, Dr. Harvey. If he’s half the doctor you are, the town of Nowhere is very lucky to have him,” Mr. Parsons said. Dr. Harvey pushed open the door to the exam room and went inside. Mr. Parsons and Stephen followed her.

Hope exhaled in frustration once the door was shut. Stephen Bennett had no business talking to a patient about a payment schedule. He had no clue what he was talking about. He had been in town for less than an hour! She was going to have to watch out for that man.

Hope busied herself with filing Dr. Harvey’s paperwork and preparing a few letters Dr. Harvey had dictated. She sealed each envelope, wrote out the correct addresses, and placed a stamp in the corners of the envelopes.

When she had finished all of the paperwork, she got a broom and dustpan out of the tiny closet near the front of the office and began to clean up. There was only one more patient for the day, and they were scheduled to arrive at four o’clock. She tidied the office, wiping all the surfaces down with a rag, then wringing it out in the small field

behind the building.

After Mr. Parsons left, Dr. Harvey took Stephen back into her office until the next patient arrived. On the hour, a worried young mother, Mrs. Laura Green, showed up. She held a crying baby in her arms.

"Hello, Mrs. Green. I'll let the doctor know you're here," Hope told the woman. She felt sorry for Mrs. Green, who seemed like she hadn't slept in days. As she started to walk toward the back, Stephen came out of Dr. Harvey's office and greeted Mrs. Green.

"I'm Dr. Bennett. I'll be assisting Dr. Harvey. Let's get you into the exam room." Stephen put a hand on Mrs. Green's back reassuringly. Mrs. Green looked a little confused, but she followed him into the exam room, and Hope heard Dr. Harvey come out of her office a little while later and enter the exam room.

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Green walked out of the office with an expression of relief on her face. The baby had finally stopped crying. Dr. Harvey and Stephen waved goodbye to Mrs. Green from the porch.

When Dr. Harvey came back into the office, she looked at the clock on the wall. "Oh, no. I need to stop by the mercantile before I go home today. I'm going to leave early. Stephen, please clean up the exam room. Hope will show you how to lock up the office. I'll send Francis to pick you up here at the end of the day."

Stephen nodded. Hope frowned. She didn't want to have to babysit Stephen Bennett. It was true that he was a grown man, but Hope knew he would have a lot of questions that would end up annoying her.

Sure enough, no sooner had Dr. Harvey walked out of the office than Stephen asked Hope where the cleaning supplies were.

"In there." Hope pointed to the small closet. "I have some billing to take care of." Hope pulled out Dr. Harvey's ledger and began to write in it. Stephen disappeared into the exam room.

A few minutes, he came back out to the front room. "Hope, may I speak with you for a moment?"

"Sure." Hope looked up from her ledger.

"Earlier today, it seemed like you were more concerned with Mr. Parsons' payment than his health," Stephen began, seeming a bit unsure of himself.

Hope found herself growing angry. "What do you mean?"

"It's just that I think it would be better if we could all focus on our patients' health and not make a big deal about their financial situations." Stephen looked down at the cloth he held in his hands.

"I handle all the accounts and billing. If people don't pay their bills, Dr. Harvey won't get what she's due. And neither will you or I. Is that what you want?" Hope pointed out.

"That's not what I'm trying to say." Stephen sounded even more uncomfortable. "It was just a suggestion to maybe, well, try to be a

little nicer.”

Hope took a deep breath. She could not believe the nerve of this man. He barely even knew her or the practice. “I take direction from Dr. Harvey and Dr. Harvey only.”

Stephen nodded. “Yes, of course. I shouldn’t have said anything. I just felt badly for Mr. Parsons, and I wanted to say something on his behalf.”

Hope wanted to add that Mr. Parsons was almost always late on his payments, but she didn’t see the point. Stephen Bennett had already made up his mind about her. What he didn’t realize was she had already made up her mind about him, too.

Chapter 2

Hope and Stephen mostly avoided each other for the rest of the week. Each of them spoke mainly to Dr. Harvey, who then passed along the message to the other person. The only problem was the late afternoons, because Stephen often stayed late to study medical textbooks while Hope balanced the ledger and prepared for the next day.

On Thursday evening, just after Dr. Harvey had left for the day, Hope heard a furious pounding on the door. She got up and peered out the door. There were no more patients scheduled, and she normally kept the door locked while she completed her end-of-day tasks.

To her surprise, she saw her sister, Betsy, and Betsy's husband, Charles, outside the door. In Charles's arms was his younger brother, Matthew, clutching his leg. Charles's parents had died a few years earlier, orphaning him and his four young siblings. When he and Betsy had fallen in love and married, she had become the children's adoptive mother.

"Stephen, please come out here!" Hope called as she unlocked the door.

Stephen poked his head out of the exam room. "What's going on?"

Hope held the door open and Charles rushed in first with Matthew. "We need to see Dr. Harvey. Matthew was climbing a tree in our yard and fell. I'm certain the bone is broken." Betsy was close behind, looking a little green. Hope knew Betsy could get a little sick at the sight of blood or other injuries. Hope didn't have that problem. Working at Dr. Harvey's office meant she had seen a little bit of everything.

"Let's take a look. Bring him into the exam room," Stephen directed. Charles and Betsy stared at Stephen warily.

"Who are you?" Charles asked. "I don't intend to be rude, but I've never seen you before in my life."

"It *really* hurts!" Matthew piped up. Hope could see that Matthew's eyes were streaked with red.

"I'M SORRY." Charles walked into the exam room and set Matthew down on the table. Hope, Betsy, and Stephen followed, all crowding into the small room.

"I'm Dr. Stephen Bennett, Dr. Harvey's nephew. I'm here to apprentice with her. I've been through medical school just like Dr. Harvey. I can take care of your son." Stephen stuck his hand out, and Charles shook it.

"I'm Charles Brooks. I appreciate your help. It's odd to see a doctor outside of Dr. Harvey. She's been our only town doctor for years. Oh, and this is my brother, Matthew. He's not my son."

"My apologies. Nice to meet you, Matthew. Let's see if we can get you all sorted." Stephen began gently pressing different parts of Matthew's leg and seeing where it hurt.

"Ouch. Ouch. *OUCH!*" Matthew yelped. Hope could see that his leg was tilted at a frightening angle, but Stephen didn't look fazed.

"Matthew, tell me a little about where you go to school," Stephen said calmly.

Matthew stared at the doctor as if he were crazy. "What does that have to do with my leg?"

"I'd like to hear more about your favorite subject. I bet you're very good at math. Is that right?" Stephen continued. Hope privately wondered what in the world Stephen was doing.

Matthew's chest puffed out a little. "That's right. Actually, I'm helping my younger—*Hey!*"

As Matthew was talking, Stephen had bent down and applied pressure to his entire leg, snapping it back into the correct position. Betsy turned away and buried her head into Charles's chest. Hope stared at what Stephen was doing, fascinated.

"Sorry about that, Matthew. I was trying to distract you so it wouldn't hurt too badly," Stephen explained.

Matthew rubbed his leg in amazement. "It still hurts, but nowhere near as badly as before."

"Thank you, Doctor!" Charles exclaimed.

"Well, there's still work to be done. His leg isn't dislocated anymore, but the bone is broken, and we need to set it. Matthew, you'll need to stay off your feet for a few weeks," Stephen said with a serious expression.

Matthew nodded grimly. "No more climbing trees."

"No more climbing trees," Betsy echoed sternly.

Charles ruffled Matthew's hair. "I'm sure you'll be back up there in no time."

Betsy put her hands on her hips. "I'm not so sure about that!"

Stephen laughed. "Well, the hardest part is over. But maybe we could get a little more space in the room?"

Everyone just stared at him until Hope clapped her hands. "He's trying to say that we're crowding him. Charles and Betsy, let's go wait in the front room or on the porch. Matthew, we'll be right outside. Call out if you need us." Hope took charge.

Betsy and Charles nodded. Charles squeezed Matthew's shoulder. "Call if you need anything, okay?"

Matthew grinned. "I'll be fine, Charles. Thanks, though." He looked at Stephen with newfound respect. "I'm ready, Doctor."

Hope led Betsy and Charles out onto the porch, where Charles took a seat and Betsy began pacing. "Oh, Hope, I'm so glad you and Dr. Bennett were here. We were so scared."

"Yes. Dr. Bennett is new, but he doesn't seem half-bad." Hope took a seat next to Charles.

"Not half-bad!" Betsy cried. "Why, he was wonderful in there! Snapping Matthew's leg back into place like it was nothing at all. Show a little more kindness, Hope!"

Hope knew Betsy must be very agitated, because she usually wasn't so forward. "I'm sure Dr. Harvey would have done the same thing. It's part of medical training."

Charles was distracted. "I hope it's not too painful in there. I've never broken a bone. Have either of you?"

"No. And neither have any of my sisters, which is remarkable, because some of them are quite clumsy," Hope told him. Charles grinned. All of Betsy's sisters had unique personality traits, and he found Hope's complete and utter honesty refreshing.

Betsy hit Hope's shoulder playfully. "Be careful what you say!"

"I'm not talking about you," Hope replied truthfully. "You're not clumsy. Except the one time when you accidentally took some of Edna Petunia's 'cough medicine'. Now, that was a story..." Hope recalled.

Betsy looked embarrassed. "No, Charles doesn't need to hear about that! It was an honest mistake."

Charles looked amused. "Please tell me more, Hope."

"It was Christmas Eve, and Betsy was starting to come down with a cold—" Hope began.

Just then, Stephen pushed the front door open. "You can come back in now."

"You'll have to finish your story another time," Charles told Hope as they followed the doctor back into the office. Matthew was still sitting on the exam table, his leg now set in a splint.

Betsy rushed to his side and put her hand on his shoulder. "How are you feeling?"

Matthew grinned. "I'm great. Dr. Bennett said I can't do chores for six weeks!"

Betsy smiled and patted his head. "No wonder you're smiling!"

“That’s right. Lots of rest, and come back to see me in six weeks’ time. Until then, avoid putting any pressure on your leg.” Stephen instructed.

“Thank you very much, Doctor.” Charles shook Stephen’s hand. Betsy gave him a hug.

Charles lifted Matthew up and Betsy held the front door open for them as they left for their house, which wasn’t too far from Dr. Harvey’s office.

“Goodbye, Dr. Bennett!” Matthew called over Charles’s shoulder.

Hope closed the door and locked it again. She looked around the room and found a file she hadn’t put away yet. She opened the filing cabinet and placed it in the correct spot.

Stephen finished cleaning up the exam room and putting away all the supplies he had used.

“I’m assuming you know the Brooks family and can make sure their account gets billed properly?” Stephen questioned.

Hope nodded. “Actually, Betsy’s one of my sisters.”

“Oh, wow. I didn’t realize that! You don’t look very much alike,” Stephen commented.

Hope realized that Stephen was one of the first people she had met since coming to Nowhere who didn’t know that she was one of the Orlan orphans. Ever since Edna Petunia and Cletus had taken the girls in several years ago, their reputation had spread quickly throughout town. Almost everyone had at least heard of the fifteen so-called bastard orphans the Sanders couple had adopted.

“That’s because we were both orphaned and adopted,” Hope explained.

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry.” Stephen’s face turned red.

“There’s no need to apologize. That’s like me saying, ‘I’m sorry you have dark hair.’” Hope looked around the room. “I think I’m done here for the day. Are you going to stay here for a while?”

“I think I’ll head out now, too. Let me grab my bag.” Stephen went back into the exam room and picked up his bag. Hope took the keys from their hook near her desk and went outside. Once Stephen had joined her on the porch, she pulled the heavy front door shut and locked it.

“I’m glad you were here to fix Matthew’s leg. I’m sure it would have been very painful if he’d had to wait until tomorrow,” Hope told Stephen as they set off for their respective houses.

“I’m glad I was here, too. It’s always nice to feel useful. From what I’ve seen of Nowhere so far, everyone really loves my aunt and isn’t interested in anyone new in town,” Stephen confided.

“That’s just the nature of it being a small town. I’m sure people will like you just fine once they get to know you,” Hope told him. She

found herself enjoying talking to Stephen away from the office. She liked hearing what he had to say.

Hope and Stephen approached the main street of Nowhere. Hope usually turned left, and she knew Stephen normally turned right.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Hope told Stephen, but Stephen simply stood in place, frozen. "What's wrong?"

"Hope, I feel we got off on the wrong foot earlier this week. May I walk you home?" Stephen asked nervously.

Hope laughed. "I don't care one way or another. If you really want to walk me home, you can."

Stephen breathed a sigh of relief and they continued walking. They passed by the mercantile, where Ruby was sweeping in the front of the store. Hope waved to her as she passed. Ruby waved back.

"Is that a friend?" Stephen asked.

"My sister," Hope explained, and Stephen nodded. He assumed this sister had also been adopted, since the woman in the window looked nothing like Hope or Betsy.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" Hope asked Stephen, and his face clouded.

"I do, and they're all back in Seattle. I miss them a lot," Stephen admitted.

"Why did you come here, then?" Hope inquired.

"I needed to find a doctor I could do my training under, and Aunt Iris is a family member. It seemed as good a place as any." Stephen looked away, and Hope decided to change the subject.

"I'm glad you know what you're doing. I was worried you weren't going to be able to take care of Matthew, and we'd have to send for Dr. Harvey," Hope told him.

Stephen recognized that this was likely the closest thing to a compliment he was going to get. "Thank you."

They walked quietly for a few minutes. "You're not like other girls, are you?"

"What do you mean by that?" Hope was perplexed.

"It's just that many girls of your age are content to stay quiet and hide their true feelings. They don't come right out and say what's on their mind. You seem like you just say your true feelings."

"I've always been this way. It gets on people's nerves most of the time." Hope laughed as she thought about it.

"Well, I suppose some people might take it the wrong way..." Stephen trailed off.

"That's exactly right. But I don't see a reason to lie or make things up just to make people feel better," Hope tried to explain.

Stephen's arm brushed Hope's as they continued on their way. She felt the same jolt she'd felt earlier when their hands had touched. This

was a new and unfamiliar sensation, and it wasn't unpleasant. As they walked along, Hope found herself walking closer to him so their arms might briefly touch each other again.

When they arrived in front of the Sanders property, Stephen glanced up at the large home. "You live in a beautiful house."

"Thank you. My adoptive father inherited it from his parents, and that's the only way Edna Petunia and Cletus were able to adopt all of us orphans." Hope looked at Stephen's face again. He really was good-looking. Every time she looked at him, she felt a fluttering sensation in her stomach.

"How many orphans are there?" Stephen wondered out loud.

"There are fifteen of us in total." Hope grinned as she saw Stephen's eyes grow wide. "But some of my sisters have gotten married and moved out. There are only seven of us left now that live at home."

"Are all of your sisters as special as you are?" Stephen imagined a house full of girls as fiery and opinionated as Hope.

"I don't know. We've all got our own likes and dislikes, I suppose. But in other ways we're just the same," Hope answered truthfully. "Thank you for walking me home. I'll see you at the office."

"Good night, Hope." Stephen waited as Hope opened the door and entered the house. "I have a feeling you are one of a kind," Stephen whispered quietly into the night sky.

Chapter 3

In a few weeks' time, Stephen had settled into the routine of Dr. Harvey's office. He and Hope tried not to get in each other's way during the day. In the early afternoons, Dr. Harvey would leave early to spend time with her family, and Hope and Stephen would have the office to themselves. Stephen asked Hope to review the schedule for the next day's patients with him so he could learn the names and details about his patients.

Hope was only occasionally annoyed when Stephen was around. She learned that he was responsible and level-headed, and many of Dr. Harvey's regular patients warmed up to him quickly. But he also was a stickler for treating all of their patients kindly and charitably and didn't have much patience for the no-nonsense way Hope dealt with visitors.

"Hope!" Stephen exclaimed after the last patient of the day had left the office. "Mr. Harris said you told him you thought he had gained weight since his last visit!"

"He did gain weight since his last visit." Hope was confused. Why did it matter?

"That's not very polite," Stephen pointed out. Sometimes, he didn't know what to do with his whip-smart assistant. She was highly intelligent and capable, but her interpersonal demeanor could use some work.

"It's not my job to be polite." Hope shut the drawer she was filing papers into.

Stephen sighed in exasperation as they heard a loud knock at the door.

Hope walked over to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open. "What are you doing here?"

Edna Petunia stood in the doorway, holding a freshly-baked apple pie. "Is Dr. Harvey still here?"

"No, ma'am, she's left for the day. I'm Dr. Stephen Bennett, and I'm her apprentice. What seems to be the trouble?" Stephen's voice was warm and reassuring.

Edna Petunia whistled. "Why, if you're not the spitting image of a

man I knew back in Seattle. Is there any chance you're related to Lawrence Bennett?"

Stephen nodded. "That's my father, ma'am."

"Why, that's right. And you even have your mother's eyes. Hyacinth, right?" Edna Petunia marveled at how much Stephen looked like his parents.

"Wait a minute. How do you know his parents?" Hope looked back and forth between Edna Petunia and Stephen.

"I used to work for Iris when we lived in Seattle. I knew all of her sisters and the men they married. Oh, the stories I could tell you about your father!" Edna Petunia winked at Stephen.

Stephen blushed and looked down at his feet. "I'm confused. Do you need to see a doctor?"

"No, I just came to bring this pie over for Iris. She always loved my desserts." Edna Petunia held up the pie tin in her hands. "But you can have some if you want. You look like a man with a healthy appetite." Edna Petunia reached over and patted Stephen's stomach without batting an eye.

Stephen took a step backward, feeling completely bewildered. Who was this odd woman, and why on earth was she touching his stomach?

Hope stifled a giggle. Sweet, kind Stephen was no match for Edna Petunia. Still, she felt like she needed to help him. "Stephen, this is my adoptive mother, Edna Petunia."

Recognition gleamed in Stephen's eyes. "Oh, so you're the famous Edna Petunia I've heard so much about?"

"You can't believe *all* the stories they tell about me!" Edna Petunia sighed dramatically. "But truly, would you like a piece of pie? It's fresh out of the oven."

"I'm starving. I'd love a piece," Hope chimed in.

Edna Petunia went to the supply closet and found a few plates and forks. She used one of the forks to slice a few portions of pie onto the dishes and passed them out to Hope and Stephen.

"This is our little secret, do you understand?" Edna Petunia said solemnly. "If Iris Harvey finds out I brought my homemade apple pie over here, and she didn't get a piece, she will not be happy."

"I won't say a word," Stephen promised.

Hope was busy chewing her pie. "Edna Petunia, I'll never learn to bake the way you do."

"Nonsense, Hope. With a little elbow grease, you can bake anything you set your mind to," Edna Petunia scoffed.

Stephen shook his head in amazement. The more he learned about Hope's family, the more he was convinced that they were *all* remarkable.

Once they had all finished eating their pie, Hope gathered the

plates and washed them off in the small sink near the exam room.

"I should be going now," Edna Petunia announced. "Dr. Bennett, it was wonderful to meet you. I'm throwing a birthday dinner for my husband this Saturday evening, and I'd be honored if you would attend. I believe Iris and Francis are going to be there."

Hope stared at Edna Petunia with a puzzled look on her face. "I thought it was going to be family only."

Edna Petunia smiled. "Iris and Francis are close enough to family, and Dr. Bennett here is their family, so that all works out, now doesn't it?"

Hope frowned. "Not really—"

Edna Petunia stood up and walked toward the door. "Dr. Bennett, I don't take no for an answer. Ever. We'll see you on Saturday, young man." She exited the building with her pie tin in hand.

Stephen exhaled. "Wow. Is she always like that?"

Hope grinned. "Always."

* * *

HOPE FELT like the next few days blurred together. She, Edna Petunia, and her sisters prepared for Cletus's big birthday dinner that weekend. Hope and her sisters had bought him a thick leather history book that they thought he would like. It didn't make much sense to anyone else in the family, but Cletus loved long non-fiction books—the bigger, the better. Under Edna Petunia's direction, they had baked cookies, cakes, and other goodies for the celebration. Edna Petunia was also preparing an enormous pot roast for the occasion.

At work, Stephen continued to get on her nerves. He was always finding reasons to comment on the way Hope spoke to patients or asking her to explain things to him. She respected the work he did as a doctor, but she was frustrated at having to spend extra time explaining herself and her actions to him.

"Hope, could you do me a favor and tell me more about why Mrs. Robertson is on a payment plan?" Stephen asked one day after lunch.

Hope, exhausted from staying up the evening before decorating for Cletus's party, finally lost her temper. "Stephen, I can't keep going over these things with you! I've got so much work to do here!" Hope cried.

Dr. Harvey overheard this as she came out of her office. She saw how frustrated Hope looked and how worried her nephew looked. "What's going on out here?"

"Nothing." Stephen tried to act nonchalant, but Dr. Harvey saw right through his act.

“Stephen, you’ve been working a lot lately. Why don’t you go home early today? I’ll finish and lock up.” Dr. Harvey put a hand on her nephew’s shoulder.

“What? No, I couldn’t do that. I’m your apprentice. I’m here to learn,” Stephen protested.

“Stephen, don’t worry about that right now. Your mother would have a fit if she saw how hard I’m making you work. Go home and get some rest.”

Stephen looked like he wanted to say something else, but he simply nodded, grabbed his medical bag, and exited the building.

Dr. Harvey turned to Hope. “I’m sorry, Hope. There are a few things I should have explained to you before Stephen started working here.”

Hope was intrigued. “Like what?”

“Well, Stephen hasn’t had an easy time since going to medical school. My sister and her husband brought him up well; he’s a smart young man with a good head on his shoulders. But he ran into some trouble in medical school,” Dr. Harvey began.

Hope leaned forward. “What kind of trouble?”

“Stephen went to the same medical school I went to in Seattle. There was a young woman he was friends with who worked as a secretary at the school. She found herself expecting a child out of wedlock.” Dr. Harvey’s face was twisted in a pained expression.

“You don’t mean to say that Stephen—”

Dr. Harvey put her hands up. “No, no! Nothing like that. But you know how people talk. It turns out that the man who had fathered the child was abusive and cruel. Stephen’s friend worried that if he found out about the baby, he would hurt her. So he allowed people to think that he was the father of the child.”

“Why would he do a thing like that?” Hope burst out. “That’s just plain dumb.”

“Well, at the time, he thought that was the only way to protect his friend,” Dr. Harvey said gently. “The town grew very upset, and his reputation was destroyed. People said they didn’t want to have him as a doctor since he didn’t have good judgment.”

“Why didn’t he just tell the truth?” Hope questioned.

“He felt he couldn’t. He was so concerned about his friend. He even agreed to marry her, according to my sister. But then one night, she just disappeared. Stephen never heard from her again. But it was too late. The town had already given up on Stephen. None of the doctors wanted him as an apprentice.” Dr. Harvey looked out the window. “What I’m trying to say is Stephen’s had a very tough time in his life. It would really be helpful to me if you could take it easy on him.”

Hope took a deep breath. "I understand, Dr. Harvey. Thank you for telling me all that." Hope felt sorry for Stephen. It couldn't have been easy to do all the things that he did and face the public shame and humiliation. She vowed to try to be a little nicer to him. As long as he didn't get in her way.

"Thank you for listening. You know, Hope, I'm lucky to have you around." Dr. Harvey patted the top of Hope's hand. "Now, why don't you get out of here a little early today, too? You deserve a break. I know you've been preparing for Cletus's birthday dinner."

Hope laughed. "The way Edna Petunia talks about it, you'd think it was the birthday party of the century."

Dr. Harvey joined in. "If I know Edna Petunia, it certainly will be."

Chapter 4

“**H**appy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Cletus, Happy Birthday to you!” The crowd finished singing as Cletus Sanders closed his eyes, made a wish, and blew out his seventy-odd candles. With unruly white hair and bright eyes, he somehow still looked youthful and exuberant. Each time Edna Petunia passed by with a tray of cookies or a cake dish, he patted her bottom as she fed him a bite of whatever goodie she was holding.

Stephen couldn't believe how Edna Petunia and Cletus acted like a couple of young fools in love. It was sweet, in a way, but it was also quite weird. He was having a nice time, but he wished he would be able to spend some time alone with Hope.

He'd felt like they were doing well and becoming friends after he had set Matthew's leg, but ever since that night, she'd been somewhat unpredictable. She'd avoided him when he'd tried to ask her questions, and he didn't blame her. She'd asked him to stay out of her way, and he had tried to, but he just couldn't stay away completely. As crazy as she made him with her abrupt nature, he was drawn to her. He wondered if he'd be able to spirit her away from the crowd and take a walk around the property with her.

Hope caught Stephen staring at her and returned his gaze. He blushed and looked away. She had to admit, he seemed more and more handsome each time she saw him. She thought it might have had something to do with Dr. Harvey's story about how he had tried to help his friend, but she wasn't sure. Even though it had been a pretty stupid thing to do in her eyes, it was also noble, and she couldn't help but respect him for it.

Cletus was opening his gifts, and as he pulled out the history book, he began to whoop. “It's just what I wanted!” the older man exclaimed. “Thank you, girls!” Each one of his fifteen adopted daughters came up to give him a hug and a kiss.

Everyone was clustered around two long picnic tables set up in the back yard. The Sanders family had expanded so much that there was no longer enough room for the entire clan inside the house. Though it was spacious, there was no dining table that could accommodate such

a large group. Hope's sisters Ruby, Opal, Sarah Jane, Evelyn, Penny, Dorothy, Betsy, and Gertrude had all married and had children of their own. A few of them had also adopted children. This meant the Sanders family was constantly growing.

After dinner, Cletus received visitors in his formal parlor. The rest of the guests lounged outside or throughout the house, snacking on desserts, laughing with each other, and sipping lemonade. Edna Petunia was thrilled. Her party was a huge success, and everyone was having a wonderful time.

Stephen passed through the parlor to personally wish Cletus a happy birthday.

"Hello, son. I hear you work with our girl, Hope," Cletus said as he grabbed Stephen's hand and pumped it firmly.

"That's right, Cletus." Stephen smiled. "She's quite remarkable."

Cletus looked surprised. He pretended to have trouble hearing Stephen and leaned in closer to the younger man. "Yes, she is. Tell me, Stephen, has my reputation preceded me?"

"What do you mean?" Stephen furrowed his brow.

"Has anyone in this town explained to you what happens when someone hurts one of my daughters?" Cletus asked, staring at Stephen intently.

"Uh, not exactly, sir," Stephen stammered.

Cletus maintained eye contact. "I get mad. I get very, very mad. And do you know what I do when I get mad?"

Stephen gulped. He had not been prepared for this. "Uh, no, sir."

Cletus leaned back and let out a laugh. He clapped Stephen on the back. "I'm just giving you a hard time. You'll get used to all of us and our senses of humor soon enough."

Just then, Edna Petunia scurried over with what appeared to be a freshly-baked plate of pastries. She offered them to everyone in the room, and Cletus grabbed two.

"Come on, Stephen, you're too skinny. Put some meat on those bones. I like a man with a little fat on his figure!" Edna Petunia chided. She held one of the pastries in front of his face for so long that he finally grabbed it. "There you go!"

"Thank you, my dear." Cletus looked at his wife affectionately. All these years later, and they still acted like newlyweds.

"I'm glad you've met Dr. Stephen Bennett. You know, I knew his mother and father back in my Seattle days," Edna Petunia explained.

Cletus nodded. "We're glad to have you in Nowhere, son. Please, come over any time for dinner. We heard how you set our grandson Matthew's leg and treated him with such compassion. That means the world to us."

Stephen was touched by Cletus's kind words. He wasn't sure that

the man would know him, let alone be aware that he was the one who had set Matthew's broken leg. He was really starting to feel at home in the Sanders house. "I appreciate that, Cletus. I was just doing my job. I would love to eat dinner here one evening. Thank you for the offer."

"Of course." Cletus beamed at Stephen. Here was a young man with a good head on his shoulders. He couldn't say that for half the young men he met in the town of Nowhere.

"I should let you get back to the other guests." Stephen stepped aside. There was a long line of people waiting to talk to Cletus. In addition to his daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren, a few close family friends such as the Harveys were mingling nearby.

Stephen walked into the kitchen, where he saw several of Hope's sisters and a few of their husbands. He still had no idea how he would keep them all straight. Two of them were twins, but he couldn't remember which ones. And a few of them looked alike, even though they weren't twins. It was incredibly confusing.

"Are you having a good time?" Martha asked. She noticed the confused expression on his face. "I'm Martha. It's okay if you don't remember every single one of our names. There are a *lot* of us!"

Stephen smiled at her. "Thank you, Martha. I am having a wonderful time. Your family is really kind."

"I'm so glad. I heard all about how you helped Matthew the other day. It sounds like we're lucky to have you here as one of our town doctors." Martha grabbed a cookie from a nearby tray and began eating it.

"I'm just an apprentice for now." Stephen blushed and looked down at his feet.

"But if you like it here, will you stay? I'm sure Dr. Harvey could use the help. Edna Petunia always says the poor doctor really burns both ends of the midnight candle, whatever that means."

Stephen looked surprised. "I haven't really thought about it. I never considered staying in Nowhere after my apprenticeship is over. I suppose I need to talk to my aunt about it."

Martha nodded. "I understand. It's strange to move to a new place. I think all of us orphans felt a little strange when we moved from New York to Texas. But now there's no question. Nowhere is definitely home."

Stephen looked around the party. He could tell that Hope and her sisters considered Nowhere their home. They had a beautiful place to live, two warm, loving—if eccentric—parents, and some of them even had husbands and families of their own.

He reminded himself that he was lucky, too. His aunt Iris had opened her home to him with open arms. Although he loved his cousins, they were much younger than him, and he was envious that

Hope had sisters that were close to her age. Still, he remembered, he was lucky that Iris and Francis had been so willing to let him come stay with them. Even some of his closest friends had refused to speak to him after the situation with his friend during medical school.

Yes, all in all, he was glad to have the chance to make a fresh start in Nowhere. As he enjoyed more of Edna Petunia's incredible desserts, he wandered outside to see if he could find Hope. He found himself wanting to be near her at all times. He loved hearing her talk about different situations. Although at times it made him mad, at other points, it felt refreshing to hear someone tell the truth so freely.

He spotted her out back, talking to two of her sisters at the long row of picnic tables. She had thrown her head back as she laughed at something the sister sitting next to her was saying, and she looked beautiful in the moonlight.

Stephen walked over to Hope and her sisters. The group quieted as soon as he approached.

"I apologize for the interruption." Stephen noticed one of the girls pinching Hope.

"Ouch!" Hope whispered to Katie.

"You didn't mention that Stephen Bennett was so good-looking!" Katie squealed.

"Shh!" Hope hissed.

Stephen overheard the exchange and blushed.

Dorothy cleared her throat. "We're glad you're here to celebrate with us, Dr. Bennett. I saw you in church with Dr. Harvey's family and was wondering who the new man in town was. We don't get too many of those in Nowhere."

"And when we do get them, one of us tends to marry them before long!" Katie managed to say before bursting into giggles. Hope glared at her.

Stephen put his hands in his pockets. He felt uncomfortable being so outnumbered by the Sanders girls. They were rather intimidating. He could tell how loyal and close they all were to each other, which made him miss his siblings back in Seattle.

"How are you enjoying Nowhere so far?" Dorothy changed the subject.

Stephen smiled at her gratefully. "It's very nice. Everyone has been very kind to me, and it's nice to spend time with Iris's and Francis's children."

"And how is work? I hope our Hope isn't giving you too hard of a time," Dorothy continued.

Stephen looked right at Hope. "No, it's a pleasure to work with Miss Sanders. As I see it, my aunt Iris and I are quite lucky to have her."

Hope seemed embarrassed. "I'm just doing my job, that's all."

"And you do it very well," Stephen said, still staring into Hope's eyes. She looked down.

"Have you had a piece of Edna Petunia's famous chocolate chip cake yet?" Dorothy asked.

Stephen shook his head. "I haven't, but I've eaten far too much tonight to consider even one more dessert. Everything was incredible."

"Let us know if you change our mind. I'm going to get myself another piece. Don't tell my nieces and nephews—I told them all they could only have one piece each!" Dorothy confided. "Katie, you're coming with me."

"I'm full, too!" Katie protested, but Dorothy grabbed her arm and set off for the dessert table, leaving Stephen and Hope alone.

"Your family is really amazing," Stephen told Hope once her sisters were out of earshot. "Everyone has been so friendly and kind to me tonight. I feel like I can talk to all of your sisters easily, like I've known them all for a long time. I can see why you like it here."

Hope shrugged. "It's really the only family I've ever known. Our matron in the orphanage did the best she could, but it wasn't the same. When we moved here, we got to live in this beautiful house and had these two crazy but well-meaning people fussing over us. I know it's probably not normal, but it's normal for *me*."

Stephen nodded. "I think I understand. The way I grew up in Seattle is all I know. Getting used to Nowhere has been an adjustment for me."

"What do you miss the most about Seattle?" Hope asked.

Stephen answered without hesitation. "My brothers and sisters."

"Do you think any of them would ever move to Nowhere?" Hope looked around at her sisters sitting at the other picnic tables. She couldn't imagine moving someplace new and leaving all of them behind.

"No, I don't think they will. But I can always go back and visit, I suppose," Stephen said quietly.

"Your aunt told me how you tried to help that girl you knew who was in trouble." Hope admitted.

Stephen's face wore a pained expression. "I was hoping to keep that private."

"I won't tell a soul," Hope promised. Stephen knew she was telling the truth.

"I just couldn't bear the thought of that child growing up without a father. My father is the best man I know—confused about women most of the time, but good. I hope to follow in his footsteps one day." Stephen couldn't believe how much he was opening up to Hope.

"When you talk like that, you sound like Edna Petunia," Hope told

him. "She's always talking about us poor bastard orphans and how we needed someone to come along and save us. Which, in a way, she and Cletus did."

"Bastards?" Stephen thought he'd misheard Hope, but she nodded.

"Yes, that's just her term for us. It sounded odd the first few times she mentioned it, but then my sisters and I realized she didn't mean anything negative by it. It's just the way she talks." Hope smiled.

"She certainly seems like quite the woman. I know my aunt trusts Edna Petunia with her life," Stephen said, spotting the older woman replenishing the dessert table.

"Yes." Hope gazed lovingly at her adoptive mother. "She's got her own way of doing things, but she's also completely dependable and will do anything for the people she loves."

"My mother is the same way," Stephen told Hope.

"And what about your father? What's he like?" Hope asked. She found that she was genuinely curious about what he had to say. She didn't know why she was so interested in the new doctor, but she felt desperate to keep talking to him.

"Well, he's a novelist. He's written many books, but he says his favorite story is the way he won my mother's hand in marriage," Stephen confided.

"And what is that story?" Hope prompted.

"My father originally was after Amaryllis. That's another one of my mother and Aunt Iris's sisters," Stephen began.

"Wait a minute—are all the sisters named after flowers? Iris, Amaryllis?" Hope wondered.

Stephen chuckled. "You guessed it. My mother is Hyacinth. And then there are Rose, Lily, Daisy, Jasmine, and Violet."

Hope smiled. "Those are lovely names."

"Not as lovely as yours." Stephen resisted the urge to grab Hope's hand. Her entire family was in plain sight, and he didn't know if she felt anything for him. There was no doubt in his mind, though. He couldn't stop thinking about Hope no matter how hard he tried.

Hope frowned. "Don't change the subject. You need to finish your story."

"My father met my aunt Amaryllis when he traveled to Seattle for business. But she was in love with another man. She married him, and my father continued to travel." Stephen loved telling the story of how his family had come to be. It was unconventional, but full of the personality and spunk that made his family unique.

"My father is a novelist, and he traveled all over. Eventually, he decided to move to Seattle and stay there. That's when he fell in love with my mother. She had a column in the local paper, and he—well, let's just say, he made a lasting impression on her." Stephen chuckled

as he recalled all of the silly things his father had done when he was courting his mother. “Her column instructed men on how to attract a woman—and he followed all of her instructions to the best of his abilities.”

“And it worked?” Hope leaned in a little closer to Stephen. She loved how his eyes twinkled when he talked about his family. It was a different side of him than the calm, sensible doctor she worked with each day.

“After some confusion, it worked,” Stephen confirmed.

“So your mother and your father are both writers?” Hope asked.

“Yes. My mother slowed down once they had kids, of course. But books are very important to them—to all of us, actually,” Stephen explained.

“You should meet my sister Gertrude and her husband. They actually have a small bookstore added on to the front of their home!” Hope pointed to one of the other picnic tables, where Stephen saw a man with shaggy brown hair strumming a banjo. A few others were around him laughing and smiling. Stephen noticed that most of the other guests had left.

“I can’t believe how late it is,” Stephen told Hope.

Hope looked around and realized that Stephen was right. Most of her married sisters had gone home, but Gertrude and Jed were still there. Katie and Theresa were listening to Jed’s banjo while Hattie and Martha began packing up food. “Wow. I didn’t realize it was so late either.” She had lost all track of time talking to Stephen and hearing about his family. They sounded like lovely and intelligent people, just like him. She was surprised she had spent so much time sitting and talking to him, and she didn’t want the night to end.

“I’d be glad to help clean up.” Stephen leapt to his feet and offered a hand to help Hope up as well.

Hope felt a tiny jolt of electricity again as Stephen’s hand embraced hers. She was starting to get used to the feeling. It was strange, but exciting at the same time. “Thank you.”

Stephen walked over to the dessert table and helped Hattie pack some leftover cookies in a tin. He stacked all the empty trays together and went back into the house.

Hope followed. “You wash. I’ll dry.” As they walked into the house, Hope saw Edna Petunia and Cletus slow-dancing to Jed’s banjo music. Hope shook her head. Her parents behaved so oddly sometimes, but she truly did love them.

Stephen began wiping off one of the trays with a rag.

“What are you doing?” Hope stared at him as if he was crazy.

Stephen stopped. “Cleaning this tray. What’s the matter?”

“You’re doing it all wrong!” Hope exclaimed. “You need to put

water and soap on it before you wash with the rag.”

Stephen frowned. “This is the way I’ve always washed things.”

Hope grabbed the tray from his hands. “Well, you’re not helping one bit if you wash that way.”

Stephen stepped aside with a hurt expression on his face. “You can wash, and I can dry.”

“I may as well just do the rest of the work myself. I can see you’re not going to be much help in the kitchen,” Hope told Stephen.

Stephen was at a loss for words. He didn’t know if Hope was intentionally trying to get rid of him or just being her normal, no-nonsense self. “Could we go outside and talk?”

Hope wasn’t sure why Stephen wanted to go back outside. “But I’m still cleaning.”

“I’d just...I’d like to speak with you privately,” Stephen explained.

Just then, Edna Petunia and Cletus came charging into the kitchen, still dancing. Jed, finishing the last few notes of a song on his banjo, followed them, with Gertrude on his heels.

“Stephen! I’m glad you’re still here!” Edna Petunia cried out, squeezing his arm.

Stephen tried to smile, but still felt hurt by how abrupt Hope was acting.

“He doesn’t know how to wash dishes, though!” Hope teased. She wanted to show Stephen that she didn’t care who washed the dishes. She was perfectly capable of cleaning up. But instead of laughing, Stephen’s face went pale.

“I was just heading out. Thank you very much for a wonderful evening. You have a very special family.” Stephen offered a handshake to both Cletus and Edna Petunia.

Edna Petunia turned away his handshake and pulled him into an embrace. “You seem a little unsettled. Would you like a peppermint stick?” Edna Petunia reached down into her bodice and pulled out one of the candies.

Stephen was so stunned that he just stared at her. Edna Petunia pressed the candy into his hand and walked him to the door.

“You come again now, all right? We liked having you here, Stephen Bennett. If I’m not terribly mistaken, you might even have a little of your father’s charm!” Edna Petunia said cheerily. She turned to her husband. “And his father had a LOT of charm, if you know what I mean!”

“We should be going, too,” Gertrude said. “It’s getting late, and I’m tired.”

“Just one more song?” Jed pleaded with a huge grin. “The baby likes it when I play!” He rubbed Gertrude’s stomach, and she relented.

Hope continued to wash the dishes. She hoped Stephen had a nice

time. He had seemed upset as he left, but she didn't know why. She hoped her family hadn't scared him off. The Sanders clan could be absolutely ridiculous sometimes, but she wouldn't want it any other way.

Chapter 5

The following week, Stephen and Hope barely spoke at work.

They continued in an unspoken truce, each giving the other space to do their work.

Hope felt confused and sad. She had thought that she and Stephen had actually been developing a strong friendship, and maybe even the basis for something more. Although her sisters sometimes gossiped about the young men in town, she had never considered that she would be courted or one day marry like some of the older girls had. For the first time in her life, she'd begun to imagine what life would be like as someone's wife—and more specifically, as Stephen's wife.

On the other hand, she also enjoyed the peace and quiet that came along with Stephen's silence. She was able to get her cleaning, filing, and accounting done without Stephen interrupting her and asking her questions about the way things worked. For a seemingly intelligent man, he sure had a lot of questions. Hope thought maybe the schools in Seattle weren't as thorough as the ones she had attended.

"Hope Sanders! Aren't you looking fine today!" Hope heard a loud, cheerful voice call out. She turned around from her filing and stifled a groan.

Abner—who was known around town for taking out a different girl every night of the week—had entered the office and was staring at her with a smile on his face, his hands shoved in his pockets. "I didn't know you were working with Dr. Harvey."

"You're not on the schedule." Hope did not enjoy Abner's company and wanted to get him out of her sight as soon as possible.

"That's because I came to see you." Abner flashed his white teeth. Hope knew that his smile was the reason girls kept agreeing to go out with him, but she wasn't about to fall for his nonsense.

"You just said you didn't know I worked here." Hope turned back to her filing cabinet and continued to put away the papers she had been working with.

"I meant, now that I'm here, I'm very glad you're here," Abner tried again to convince her that she was the reason he was there.

Hope wasn't having any of it. "Why are you here?"

Abner looked embarrassed. "I have a delicate matter I'd like to see Dr. Harvey about."

Hope did not care to find out what his medical issue was. "You'll need to come back tomorrow. She doesn't have any openings this afternoon."

"I don't know if I can wait until tomorrow." Abner grimaced.

Hope had an idea. "One moment." She walked to the back of the building and rapped on the office door.

"Come in!" Stephen called.

"Would you be able to see a patient today? He's telling me it's a bit urgent. And he said it's delicate," Hope added.

Stephen looked at the clock on the wall. "I can see him quickly, before Dr. Harvey gets back for her one o'clock patient."

"Thank you." Hope turned and headed back to Abner. "You can go into the exam room."

"Dr. Harvey can see me?" Abner asked, looking excited.

"She's not here. Her nephew, Dr. Stephen Bennett, can see you."

Abner's face fell. "I prefer Dr. Harvey," he grumbled.

"Abner, you're not in a position to complain. You're very lucky the doctor is willing to fit you in," Hope told him.

Abner muttered something under his breath as he went into the exam room, hands still stuffed in his pockets.

Stephen walked into the exam room and shut the door behind him, and Hope thanked her lucky stars that Abner was out of her hair for a while. The man was downright annoying. She was pretty sure he had tried to go out with each and every one of her older sisters at some point in time.

Inside the room, Stephen looked at the man in front of him. "I'm Dr. Bennett. What seems to be your trouble today?"

Abner seemed a bit sheepish. "I can wait for Dr. Harvey to get back..."

"No, don't worry about that. I'm perfectly capable of helping. What made you come in today?" Stephen assured him.

"Everything I tell you is confidential, right?" Abner asked nervously.

Stephen nodded.

Abner looked at the door. "So you won't tell *anyone* about this?"

"Correct," Stephen said.

Abner sighed and pulled one his right hand out of his pocket. It was stuck inside a jar of honey. "I somehow managed to get my hand stuck, and I can't for the life of me get it out."

Stephen fought the urge to break into uncontrollable laughter. "And you thought a doctor would be able to help you?"

Abner frowned. "I thought you'd at least know what to do! My

stupid sister only made fun of me, and I knew I couldn't show my face at work like this."

"Well, I'll see what I can do." Stephen rolled up the sleeves of Abner's shirt. Life in Nowhere was certainly interesting. You never know who would turn up and what kind of shape they would be in.

Stephen stared at the jar and the angle Abner's hand was in.

Abner felt anxious. He didn't like the way the doctor was looking at his hand. "You know Hope out front?"

Stephen nodded.

"I'll be taking her out this weekend," Abner boasted.

"Excuse me?" Stephen tried to hide his shock and keep a professional expression on his face.

"One of the prettiest girls in town, but she's only got eyes for me. She's always fancied me, to tell the truth. All of her sisters have, when I think about it." Abner kept talking to distract himself from the pain he knew he was going to experience.

"I didn't realize that. The Sanders women are certainly wonderful young women." Stephen didn't know what to say. He tried to focus on the problem in front of him: Abner and his jar of honey.

"Wonderful looking, I'll give you that," Abner said appreciatively.

Stephen could not understand what Hope saw in the man in front of him. Although Stephen had just met Abner, he seemed like a brute who wasn't very intelligent, and certainly not deserving of someone as beautiful and smart as Hope. He cleared his throat and put both hands on Abner's arm.

"Abner, I'd like you to count to three," Stephen said. "One—" Instead of waiting for three, Stephen yanked Abner's arm hard toward the window. The jar flew off Abner's hand and smashed to the floor. Honey oozed everywhere.

"*OUCH!*" Abner screamed. He put his hand in his mouth and began sucking on it.

Stephen was in disbelief that this childish man was a potential suitor to Hope. He had to remind himself that he had no claim on the woman. She had made that perfectly clear at the house. She only thought of him as a nuisance.

"Well, you're all set. But now you've got honey all over the floor." Stephen said pointedly. He assumed Abner would at least clean up the broken glass and honey for his trouble.

Abner stopped nursing his hand and smiled. "Thank you, Doctor. I'll need both my hands this weekend, if you know what I mean!"

Stephen was horrified. He knew Abner had been joking, but he didn't find his sense of humor funny. Before he could respond, Abner had jumped off the exam table and ran out the door. Stephen shook his head and went out to get the broom and a mop.

Though he knew Hope probably had her own way of cleaning the floor, he didn't want to trouble her with Abner's mess. He also knew that if she came into the exam room, she'd have plenty of questions about what a jar of honey was doing on the floor. Even though he strongly disliked the immature young man he'd just met, he couldn't break his sworn oath as a doctor and tell Hope what had gone on in the exam room.

In the front office, Abner came up to Hope's desk and tapped on it with his newly-freed hand. "I'm going to take you out this weekend, Hope."

Hope stared at Abner with distaste on her face. "No, you are *not*."

Abner looked crestfallen. "You'd be lucky to go out with me, Hope, and you know it. I've seen the way you look at me in church."

"I've never seen you in church, Abner," Hope said truthfully.

"You should reconsider. Lots of girls are dying to get a date with me."

"You should go out with them, then. I'm not interested." Hope sighed.

Just then, Stephen came out of the exam room and saw Abner leaning in next to Hope.

"You can bill Abner for the normal amount, Hope," Stephen instructed.

"Put it on my father's account. I'll see you on Sunday, Hope!" Abner called as he walked out the door, and Hope shook her head, smiling. Some men would never learn.

Stephen frowned. The more he learned about this man, the less he liked him. "He's certainly interesting."

"That's just Abner," Hope said matter-of-factly. "He's always been like that." She returned to her pile of papers to file.

Stephen went back into his office and stayed there between visits for the rest of the afternoon. He wondered if Cletus and Edna Petunia approved of this Abner fellow. From what he had experienced so far, they seemed like kind and smart people who only wanted the best for their girls. They had their quirks, of course, but at the end of the day, it was important to them to keep their girls safe and happy. He couldn't imagine them being comfortable with that idiot dating Hope.

Hope deserved a man who was so much better than Abner. But it wasn't his place to tell her that. He hoped she'd figure it out on her own—and soon.

Chapter 6

At church the following Sunday, Dorothy invited Stephen to sit with the Sanders family. Stephen looked around for Abner, but he wasn't in sight. He smiled and accepted Dorothy's invitation, sitting down next to Dorothy's husband, Carter.

Hope stole a few glances at Stephen during the sermon. She knew she should be focusing on Micah's words, but she found it difficult to concentrate with Stephen only a few feet away. Her sisters could be obnoxious with their meddling sometimes. She knew that Dorothy had taken a liking to Stephen, finding him kind and trustworthy. Betsy, of course, had praised the way Stephen had fixed Matthew's broken leg. Edna Petunia thought Stephen was an ideal young man and had dropped several hints to Hope that she wanted the two of them to end up together.

Even Gertrude and Sarah Jane, the two pickiest Sanders sisters, had told Hope they liked Stephen. He had mentioned a few of his favorite books, and Gertrude said he had good taste. Sarah Jane liked the fact that he diligently attended church and helped some of the elderly parishioners get into and out of their seats.

Hope wasn't as sure as Edna Petunia that Stephen was her perfect match. For one thing, they had opposite ways of doing almost everything. She knew he was intelligent, but didn't have much common sense. For another, he was always so sensitive and talking to people about their feelings. For Hope, things were black and white, and she wasn't afraid to say anything out loud. She worried that Stephen was too sensitive for her tastes.

But then again, she also could admit to herself that every time she was in a room with Stephen, she watched him and only him. She loved the way his eyes lit up when he talked about something he really cared about, or how he gave extra help to the people who came to see him at the medical office. She watched him as he played and joked with her nieces and nephews and found herself imagining him as a father himself one day.

More than that, he was genuinely interested in her and what she had to say. When he talked to her, it seemed like she was the most

important person in the world to him, and she loved that feeling. Lately, though, he hadn't been saying anything at all.

After church, several of the Sanders sisters and their families set up a picnic lunch on the lawn outside the parish. A little girl ran up to Stephen and threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Hello, there!" Stephen said, amused by the spirited child.

"You fixed my brother's leg! Pretty soon, he'll be able to carry me around on his back again. Thank you!" the little girl exclaimed.

Betsy walked over to Stephen. "This is Amy. She's Matthew's younger sister. You made our entire household very happy, Dr. Bennett."

"It was nothing." Stephen smiled at Betsy. Then he leaned down and stuck his hand out to Amy. "I'm Dr. Stephen Bennett. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Amy giggled as she gave Stephen her hand. "I'm Amy Elizabeth Brooks. Pleased to make your accountant!" She ran off to play with her brothers and cousins.

Betsy laughed. "She was close with her pronunciation...we're working on her vocabulary."

"She's delightful." Stephen watched as all the children ran through the field and laughed with each other. They were lucky to grow up so close together in age and distance. He found himself missing his entire extended family in Seattle.

"How are you settling in here? I'm sure we've asked you that a hundred times, but we really do like to make people feel welcome here in Texas. I know it took me a little bit of an adjustment at first," Betsy confided.

"That's a good way to put it. I'm still getting adjusted," Stephen agreed.

"You let me know if there's anything we can do to make you more comfortable here. We're so grateful to you for setting Matthew's leg. He really gave us a scare," Betsy continued.

"Thank you, Betsy. I really appreciate that," Stephen said. He spotted Hope out of the corner of his eye. "If you don't mind—please excuse me."

Hope was standing in the middle of a group of her nephews, holding a kite. The string had gotten horribly tangled, and she was helping to unravel it.

"Hello." Stephen said, walking over to the group. "How are you, Hope?"

"Kind of busy at the moment." Hope squinted in the sunlight as she tried to figure out how to get the kite's string untangled.

"You know—I'm pretty good with these things. It can get very

windy in Seattle, and the weather is perfect for flying kites. Mind if I give it a shot?" Stephen asked gently. He knew Hope was probably going to tell him he was doing it wrong, but he had to at least try.

Hope struggled with the string for a few minutes, then handed it to Stephen. "Fine. Take it."

Stephen examined the string for a few minutes, then figured out what he needed to do. He placed his fingers at specific points on the string and then pulled until the knots and tangles shook loose.

"That was amazing!" One of Hope's nephews shouted.

"No problem. My kites used to get tangled all the time." Stephen shrugged.

Hope rolled her eyes as the boys ran away to fly their kite through the air. "Now I'm never going to live it down that you're better than me at untangling kite strings."

Stephen frowned. "No, I wouldn't tease you about that."

"Why not?" Hope asked.

"Because I care for you, Hope. And I'm not cruel to the people I care for," Stephen told her.

Hope could tell that he meant it, but they were interrupted by Cletus walking over and putting his hand on Stephen's shoulders.

"Young Dr. Bennett. How are you doing today, son?" Cletus asked. Hope was surprised—he was acting just as friendly as he would to one of her brothers-in-law. Apparently, her entire family just couldn't get enough of Dr. Stephen Bennett.

"I'm fine, Judge Sanders." Stephen used Cletus's official title, and Hope saw Cletus's smile grow a bit wider. "It's a beautiful day, and always a pleasure to see your terrific family."

"I remember the bachelor life, son, so any time you get an inkling for home cooking, you come pay us a visit. I'm sure Iris and Francis are treating you well, of course, and they're family, but everyone needs a break from family once in a while!" Cletus said.

Stephen smiled. "Thank you, sir. I will take you up on that."

"See that you do, son. Now if you don't mind, I smell some of Edna Petunia's fried chicken—and I need to get my hands on her breasts!" Cletus rushed over to the blanket where Edna Petunia was opening up a food pail.

"My family sure seems to like you," Hope remarked.

Stephen nodded. "The feeling is mutual. It makes me feel a lot better, knowing I've got you all and the Harvey family when I miss my parents and siblings."

Hope peered into Stephen's eyes. "Do you think you'll go back to Seattle when you're done with your training?"

Stephen looked right back at her. "It depends on whether or not I'm able to make a home here in Nowhere. And that depends on me

finding the right woman to settle down with and build a family.”

Hope felt a tingle run through her stomach. She wanted to be the one he settled down with, the mother of his children. But that was crazy! She barely knew him, and experience told her that they couldn’t exchange more than a few sentences without getting into a fight.

“I know you’re spoken for,” Stephen continued. “But I hope you’ll reconsider.”

Hope was puzzled. “What are you talking—?”

Just then, they heard a shout. A woman screamed. “It’s a snake!”

Robby, one of Penny’s and Tom’s adopted sons, was holding his wrist and howling. A crowd formed around him. “The snake bit me!” Robby yelled.

Penny was sobbing as well. “Oh, Robby, oh, Robby! Tom, do something!”

Stephen pushed to the front of the crowd. “Robby, I’m going to need you to sit up straight and put your arm below you. Can you do that for me?”

Tom helped Stephen adjust Robby into an upright position. They gently laid the bitten arm on the ground.

“Hope, get my medical bag. It’s in Francis’s wagon,” Stephen commanded. Hope didn’t think twice and simply did what she was told. She took off running for the Harvey’s wagon, which had been left on the other side of the church. As it came into sight, she saw that the Harveys were getting into their wagon.

“Wait!” Hope cried.

Francis Harvey looked over in concern. “What’s wrong, Hope?”

Hope was nearly out of breath. “Robby was bit by a snake! We need a medical bag.”

Iris climbed all the way into the wagon and emerged carrying two bags. She handed one to Hope and set off running next to her.

When they joined the rest of the group, Robby’s face was red and he was breathing heavily.

“I’ve got you, Robby,” Stephen said, putting his hand to Robby’s forehead. He looked at Iris. “I don’t think we have time to take him to the office.”

Iris looked back in the direction of the wagon. “But all my medicine is there. We have to go.”

Edna Petunia grabbed Iris’s arm and clenched it. “Do something!”

Stephen reached for the bag Hope was carrying, and she set it on the ground and opened it for him. He began rummaging through it. “I have a poultice in here from Seattle. It might be a little unconventional, but it’s the best shot we have.”

“Please, do whatever you need to do!” Penny cried.

Stephen pulled a small jar out of his bag, unscrewed the lid, and began rubbing a paste all over Robby's wound. He pulled out a soft bandage and placed it over the wound. "Tom, hold this in place, but don't press down."

Dr. Harvey nodded approvingly. "Good idea."

Penny looked at her son hopefully. "What's going on?"

Gradually, the redness faded from Robby's face, and he began to breathe more normally.

Stephen exhaled. "The paste is helping get the venom out of Robby's wound. As more of it drains out, he'll feel better and better."

"I know how to make him feel better." Edna Petunia took out her hip flask and poured a little into Robby's mouth. "A little cough tonic never hurt anyone."

Hope and her sisters had long suspected that Edna Petunia's flask contained something other than cough tonic, but everyone was too relieved to say anything. It looked like Robby was going to be all right.

"We should keep a close eye on him over the next few days and make sure he doesn't spike a fever. I'll show you how we can make sure the venom gets out completely," Dr. Harvey explained to Penny and Tom.

Penny hugged Iris and Stephen. "Thank you both so much. I don't know what we would have done without you here."

Hope was still in shock. She couldn't believe all that had happened in the past half-hour. She was again impressed by how calm and collected Stephen had been under pressure. Even with the entire Sanders family crying and yelling at him, he had kept his composure and figured out what needed to be done.

She also liked seeing him in command and directing people to do things. Sometimes at the practice, he seemed unsure of himself, like he didn't want to bother her or Dr. Harvey. It was nice to see him coming into his own and commanding the respect he deserved.

* * *

MONDAY BEGAN PEACEFULLY, with Hope arriving early to finish balancing the ledger. The week before had been the busiest week of the year for the practice, and she was a little behind. Stephen also arrived early and went into the office to read one of Dr. Harvey's medical journals.

When he had finished, he came out to the front area and put the journal back onto the shelf.

"That's not where that goes," Hope called from the desk.

Stephen took the book down again. "I thought all the journals go on this shelf."

Hope sighed. "No, all the textbooks go on that shelf. Journals stay in the back office. We don't have room for all of them up here."

"It's getting pretty crowded in the back office with both me and my aunt sharing the space. Could we try something different?" Stephen suggested.

Hope scowled. "That's the way it's always been, and I don't think we should change it. Especially since you don't plan to be here permanently."

Stephen tried to be patient and calm. Hope was a force to be reckoned with. Normally, he liked that about her. But sometimes, it drove him crazy. "I'll be here at least for the next year training under Dr. Harvey. Can we talk about this and come up with an arrangement that works for both of us?"

Hope kept her head in the accounts book. "Not interested."

Stephen exhaled sharply and went into the back office. He slammed the door behind him. She was impossible.

Hope's heart thudded loudly in her chest as she heard the door crash against the wall. She knew she was being a little harsh with Stephen, but she was also trying to protect herself. She had spent the rest of the evening Sunday thinking about him and how he'd helped two of her nephews, saving the day on both occasions. She couldn't stop thinking about his strong arms or kind, easy smile. Throughout her evening chores and prayers, her thoughts continued to return to Stephen Bennett.

She knew that she would never leave Nowhere, and she knew he couldn't wait to return to Seattle. He and Dr. Harvey were constantly talking about one of her sisters, or telling a story about something that had happened in their hometown. Although she knew he had left under less than ideal circumstances, she also knew he intended to return one day.

Hope had decided that her only option was to treat Stephen the same way she'd treat anyone else—with brutal honesty.

Stephen fumed in his office. He'd thought the weekend had gone well. He'd enjoyed talking to Hope and her family in church before Robby was bitten, and after he'd recovered, Hope had seemed grateful and appreciative of his work. But now she was simply being obstinate. He wondered if she was deliberately being cruel to him because she knew how he felt about her. After all, he had told her that she was special, that he liked her, and that he wanted to find a wife. Maybe this was Hope's way of letting him know she wasn't interested. He also knew that she had probably seen Abner after church. He still could not understand why a woman like Hope would go out with a man like

Abner...but then again, there was a lot he didn't understand about women.

Dr. Harvey arrived a few minutes later and sensed the tension in the small medical building. "Having a good morning?"

"Yes. I'm almost done balancing the ledger," Hope told her.

Iris nodded and walked toward the back office. "Good morning, Stephen."

"Hi, Aunt Iris." Stephen's shoulders were slumped as he read through another medical journal.

Iris took a seat in the small office. It wasn't built for two people, but they were making it work. Their elbows were almost touching. "Okay, Stephen. What's going on?"

Stephen groaned and slumped a little more. "It's Hope."

"Hope? What do you mean?" Iris was confused.

"She's so...so...impossible. She's driving me crazy, always telling me what I'm doing wrong." Stephen buried his head in his hands.

Iris smiled. "Sounds to me like Hope Sanders being Hope Sanders. She's an honest person, Stephen."

"Sometimes, I wish she wouldn't be so honest!" Stephen exclaimed in frustration.

Iris patted her nephew's back. "You seem pretty upset. Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air? Walk around a bit. You'll feel better."

"I'm sorry, Aunt Iris. I don't want to cause you any trouble."

"Nonsense. Now go ahead. You have a little time before our first patient of the day." Iris smiled as she watched her nephew walk out of the office. For such a capable and intelligent young man, he sure could work himself into a frenzy over young women. She knew he'd figure it out in due time, and as his aunt, she felt it was her duty to make sure he didn't get too emotional. She settled in at her desk and picked up the patient's chart sitting on top of the pile at her desk. It was time to get to work.

In the front office, Hope watched as Stephen stormed out of the building without a word. She wondered if he was still upset with her. She tried not to worry about it and busied herself with the accounts again. It was going to be another long day.

Chapter 7

“Hope?” Stephen called from the back office. “Can you come here?”

They had both stayed late to finish some outstanding work and were alone in the office.

Hope rolled her eyes and walked to the small office. “What do you want?”

Stephen winced at her tone. “I think there’s a mistake in these numbers. I was reviewing the ledger like Aunt Iris asked, and something’s not adding up right.”

Stephen pointed to the figures he thought were incorrect.

Hope looked at him angrily. “I don’t make mistakes.”

Stephen rubbed his eyes. He was tired, and the numbers were swimming in front of him. “I’m sorry. Please explain these numbers to me.”

Hope went to the front office and got her notebook. She carefully pointed to each number in the ledger and showed the math in her notebook. “I think you’re forgetting that Dr. Harvey provides a discount to certain patients in exchange for certain goods and services.”

“What?” Stephen looked shocked.

Hope laughed. “You didn’t know that? Like how Mrs. Jones will bring in two dozen chicken eggs so she can get a fifty percent discount on her bill. Or Peter Williams will provide grain for a year to pay for his medications. You have to factor that in.”

Stephen shook his head. “No, I didn’t know that. But I suppose it makes sense in a small town like Nowhere.”

“What’s wrong with a small town?” Hope demanded.

Stephen looked worried. “Nothing’s wrong with it.”

“I know we’re not fancy like Seattle. I’m sure you can’t wait to go back!” Hope cried as she stormed out of the office and slammed the door shut. The door hinges creaked and groaned.

“Seattle’s not fancy!” Stephen yelled angrily at the door.

Iris Harvey strode back into the office through the front door.

Hope looked guilty. “Dr. Harvey! I thought you’d left for the day.”

“What is all this commotion?” Iris demanded. “Stephen, get out here!”

Stephen walked sheepishly out of the office.

“I came back here because I forgot my bag in the office. From outside, I could hear raised voices and shouting. What’s going on in here?” Iris looked back and forth between Hope and Stephen.

Hope hung her head. “I’m sorry, Dr. Harvey.”

“I’m sorry, Aunt Iris. I shouldn’t have lost my temper. It won’t happen again.” Stephen apologized.

“That’s right, it won’t happen again. You two *need* to learn to work together without screaming at one another. Otherwise, one of you is going to have to leave.” Iris knew she was being hard on her nephew and Hope, but she felt she had no other choice. The people of Nowhere depended on her to provide a safe place for their medical care. They trusted her and relied on the small office. There was no room for disagreement or anger in her practice.

Hope swallowed. She felt awful. Dr. Harvey was a wonderful boss. She didn’t say anything lightly. She was very upset with Hope and Stephen, and Hope felt terrible that she had been so loud and unprofessional.

“I’m going to get my bag and leave again. I suggest you two find a way to calmly speak to each other.” Iris looked at each of them one more time with a serious gaze. She walked to the back office, picked up her bag, and exited out the front door without saying goodbye.

Stephen was the first to break the tension. “I’m sorry. Can we agree to work together from now on?” He offered his hand as a peace offering.

“I don’t know,” Hope mused. “Maybe it would be better if I left.”

Stephen’s face fell. “What? No, you can’t do that, Hope. You’re great at what you do. You can’t leave!”

“Dr. Harvey said one of us would have to leave. She’d never fire you. You’re her nephew,” Hope reasoned.

Stephen shook his head. “No. My aunt loves me, but you were here first, and she really respects you. Plus, like you said, I’m only here for a short time. She wouldn’t want to let you go. Maybe I should just cut my losses and go back to Seattle now.”

“No!” Hope exclaimed before she knew what she was saying.

“No?” Stephen asked with a hopeful expression. “You don’t want me to go?”

Hope finally offered Stephen her hand. They shook, and she felt that familiar jolt of excitement. She allowed him to keep holding onto her hand and stood up.

Stephen drew her closer. Hope’s heart was beating at a dizzying pace. She felt out of breath.

Stephen leaned in toward her and whispered into her ear. "Why don't you want me to go?"

Hope felt shivers all over her body. She could only groan in response.

Stephen pressed his lips against Hope's. His tongue found hers and urgently explored her mouth. It took all of Hope's focus to continue standing.

Stephen felt all of the stress leaving his body as he kissed Hope. He had wanted to take her into his arms like this since the first time he'd seen her. He knew they had their issues to work out, but for the moment, all he wanted was to be close to her.

Hope pulled away. "Wait. This isn't appropriate. I work for you."

Stephen took a deep breath. "I think you actually work for my aunt."

Hope arched an eyebrow. "I don't think this is what Dr. Harvey meant when she said we should figure out a way to work together."

Stephen looked at her and they both burst into uncontrollable laughter. Stephen pulled Hope into his chest and stroked her hair.

Hope sighed. She loved the warm feeling she had when she was in Stephen's embrace. The kiss he'd given her moments before had electrified her and woken up parts of her that she'd never realized existed. She found herself imagining what it would be like to be Stephen's wife, to build a life with him and bear his children. And then she remembered that soon, he would be heading back to Seattle. She pushed herself away from him and sat back down at her desk.

Stephen sensed a shift in Hope's mood. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. We should get back to work," Hope said briskly.

Stephen walked around and stood behind Hope. He placed his hands on her shoulders and began to massage them gently.

Hope shook Stephen's hands off. "Please, let me get back to work."

"What's going on, Hope?" Stephen asked. He didn't understand what had happened.

"I have a lot of work to do. So do you," Hope said.

Stephen sighed and went to the back office. He could tell that there would be no talking to Hope in the mood she was in.

* * *

A FEW DAYS LATER, Dr. Harvey was in the exam room with a woman who was expecting twins. Stephen worked on a stack of paperwork in the office as Hope tidied the hallway just outside.

Hope dusted the walls and wondered if Stephen was catching up on his paperwork. He liked to talk to his patients throughout the visit,

which meant he had to finish all of his written notes after they had left. He quickly fell behind, leading to long evenings in the office.

Since their kiss, they had mostly ignored each other. Hope was terrified of how much she cared for him and wanted to be with him. She was also scared that he would take off for Seattle again sometime soon. She tried to put him out of her mind completely.

Stephen listlessly wrote down his note about a gentleman with stomach pains. Since his kiss with Hope, he had been unable to think of anything else. He had barely slept or eaten a thing. His aunt had remarked upon his appetite and said he had better not get sick. There was no sense at all in a sick doctor!

He knew that the right thing to do would be to ask her parents' permission to court Hope, but he also worried that it would go against Hope's wishes. She'd barely spoken a word to him since their kiss, and when she did speak, it wasn't anything personal or important. He wondered if the Sanders family would laugh at him. Plus, there was the problem of her suitor, Abner. He hadn't been back to the office since the day he'd gotten his hand stuck in the honey jar, but Stephen couldn't get the image of him and Hope out of his mind. For the first time, Stephen thought of a horrifying possibility. What if Abner and Hope were already promised to one another?

Stephen sighed and tried to concentrate once again. He could hear Hope in the hallway, cleaning the office. It was maddening to work in such close proximity to her and not be able to grab her waist, dip her back, and kiss her passionately. He wanted to do so much more than kissing, but knew that she was a wholesome girl who deserved to be treated appropriately.

Hope finished dusting and returned to her desk. She began to work on the day's filing and soon realized that she needed Dr. Harvey's notes from the previous day, which were in the office. She walked to the back of the practice and knocked on the door.

"May I come in for a moment?" Hope asked.

"Sure," Stephen replied.

Hope gently nudged the door open and stepped inside the tiny room. "I need Dr. Harvey's files from yesterday. Do you know where they are?"

Stephen's arm brushed against Hope's as he reached for a pile on one of the shelves. Hope sucked in a deep breath as she felt the electric jolt. She could tell Stephen felt it too, because he paused with his arm in mid-air.

"Oh, Hope," Stephen breathed, then buried his face into her neck. He put his hands around her waist and ran them down her hips.

Hope sighed in pleasure. "Stephen."

"I want to hold you right here like this forever," Stephen admitted.

Hope felt tears spring to her eyes. She hadn't realized he felt the same way that she did. "Me, too."

Stephen couldn't believe his ears. He'd thought there was no way Hope would be interested in him.

Just then, the door swung open and Hope and Stephen jumped apart.

Dr. Harvey peered into the room. The room was too small for her to join them inside. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were both in here. I wanted to reference one of my books." She pointed to the one she needed, and Stephen took it down from the shelf and handed it to her.

Dr. Harvey looked back and forth between her nephew and her assistant. Both were breathing heavily, as if they had just run a race. "Are you two all right?"

"Yes!" Hope and Stephen called in unison, then stared at each other, horrified that they'd spoken at the same time.

Hope stumbled out into the hallway. "I'm finished in here. You can go in, Dr. Harvey."

"I actually need to get back to the exam room." Dr. Harvey turned and headed in that direction.

"Hope?" Stephen called from inside the office.

Hope took a deep breath. "Yes?" She replied uncertainly.

"You forgot these." Stephen handed her Dr. Harvey's files from the day before—the reason she had come into the office in the first place.

"Oh, yes, that's right." Hope turned bright red and grabbed the files, then darted back to the front office. She set the files down onto the desk and plopped down into her chair, feeling exhausted. She had never experienced the kind of exhilaration she felt with Stephen, and she found herself wishing she could have stayed in his office with him.

Inside his office, Stephen found it hard to calm his racing nerves. He went outside to the back of the medical office building to get some fresh air. He couldn't believe how incredible it had felt to hold and kiss Hope. He was also shocked that she had admitted that she enjoyed it, too. Still, he couldn't help but think about Abner and what he had said about going out with Hope. He knew Hope was fully honest, so he thought there had to be some kind of misunderstanding.

Then again, if he knew one thing, it was that he was terrible at understanding women. He took after his father in that department. They both needed all the help they could get. He found himself wishing that someone in Nowhere would write a column on how to win the hand of a local young woman. He would certainly read it and take its advice to heart!

His heart was still beating faster than usual, and he felt too keyed up and anxious to go back into the office. He walked around the small plot of land a few times, but nothing helped. He was thinking about

Hope and all the things he wanted to one day be able to do with her. He spotted a garden hose out of the corner of his eye. Without thinking, he walked over to it, picked it up, and pointed the spigot directly at his face. He turned the hose on and felt the icy water blast onto his face and shoulders, soaking his head and neck. *Ah*, he thought to himself. *Much better*. He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. It was going to be a long rest of the day.

In the exam room, Dr. Iris Harvey waved goodbye to her patient and sat down on the stool in the room, jotting down a few notes about the visit. She shook her head as she recalled the expression on Hope and Stephen's faces when she'd interrupted them in the office.

She supposed in a way, it was her fault. After all, she had told them that they needed to find a way to work together without fighting. She hadn't meant that they should work so well together that they ended up kissing in her tiny office! She thought it was funny that they thought she didn't know. The expressions on their faces had made it plain as day that they had been embracing before she'd opened the office door. She chuckled to herself. Did they think she was so unaware that she wouldn't know what was going on inside her own office? She, too, had been young and in love only a few years before.

She was happy that these two were enjoying each other's company, but she also knew she had to keep an eye on things. After all, she had a business to run, and Hope and Stephen had jobs to do. She didn't want anyone to suspect that anything untoward was going on under her watch. She decided to talk to Edna Petunia about it. The older woman always knew what to do.

Chapter 8

“Oh, if only I could have been a fly on the wall to see their faces!” Edna Petunia howled with laughter as Iris told her about Hope and Stephen’s faces when she had opened the door to her office and caught them inside together.

Iris gripped her mug of hot tea at Edna Petunia’s kitchen table. “It was rather amusing. But what are we going to do?”

“I say let the kids have fun—for a bit. We won’t tell them we know what they’ve been up to. But we should also prepare for a wedding sooner rather than later.” Edna Petunia arched an eyebrow.

Iris sighed. She knew exactly what Edna Petunia was thinking. The woman loved to go all out planning elaborate festivities for special events, and she pulled out all the stops any time one of her so-called bastards was getting married. Iris didn’t know if the town of Nowhere could handle another Sanders family wedding—it had been less than two years since Penny’s and Tom’s huge celebration. In that time, three other orphans had also married, but much to Edna Petunia’s chagrin, they had married quickly and without her help preparing. “Maybe we should give them a little time, Edna.”

“Nonsense! We need all the time we can get to plan a wedding. I won’t be tricked like the last few times. This wedding is going to happen the way I want it to,” Edna Petunia declared.

Iris shook her head. She knew Edna Petunia’s heart was in the right place. But she had a sneaking suspicion that it might be a bumpy ride. She tried to change the subject. “But what should I do at work? I don’t want my patients to think anything inappropriate is going on.”

“Yes. You can’t let anyone know that they have feelings for one another.” Edna Petunia thought for a moment. “I have an idea.”

* * *

WHEN HOPE ARRIVED at work the following day, she saw a new schedule posted next to her desk. She frowned as she read through it.

Dr. Harvey came out into the front office. “Good morning, Hope!”

Hope pointed to the new schedule. "What's this about?"

Dr. Harvey smiled brightly. "You know it was getting so crowded here in such a small space. I thought I'd even out the schedule so we wouldn't get in each other's way. No more than two of us will be working at the same time."

Hope looked at the schedule a little more closely. "It seems like all you did was make sure that Dr. Bennett and I are never working together."

"Oh, really? I hadn't noticed!" Dr. Harvey tried to keep an innocent expression on her face. "Is that a problem?"

"Yes!" Hope cried. Her first instinct was always to tell the truth, no matter what. When she saw how Dr. Harvey was staring at her, though, she thought about how her words would sound to the doctor. "Actually, no. It's no problem at all. I just wanted to make sure that Ste—I mean, Dr. Bennett—has what he needs. Maybe he can leave his notes for me and I can type them up."

Dr. Harvey smiled. "Great idea, Hope. I'll have him do that. Thank you." She walked back to her office. She couldn't believe Hope had almost called her nephew by his first name. It sounded like things were getting serious between the two of them. If things kept going at this rate, there would be another wedding before Christmas!

Dr. Harvey was thrilled at the possibility of her nephew marrying Hope. Though the girl certainly had a few rough edges, she was wholesome and hard-working, exactly the type of person who would keep her nephew on track in his life. She also loved Edna Petunia as if the woman were one of her own sisters, so the chance to be related to a dear friend by marriage was remarkable.

Still, she also knew that if she or Edna Petunia pushed too hard, Stephen and Hope might rebel and drift apart. She knew they needed to be subtle and stay out of the young people's way. She didn't have any concerns about her own ability to do that, but she thought it might be a struggle for Edna Petunia. The woman didn't have a subtle bone in her body.

At her desk, Hope fought back tears. The medical office was the only time she actually was able to talk with Stephen. Although they also saw each other Sunday in church, their families and the rest of the congregation were always around and could hear everything they had to say.

Hope couldn't believe she was almost crying. She prided herself on her ability to keep calm and collected in almost any situation. She knew it was a skill that Dr. Harvey prized in an assistant. There were many challenging and stressful events that occurred in their little office, and it was important that Hope could act rationally and confidently. But now, faced with never being able to talk to Stephen

privately, she was getting emotional.

Hope tried to focus on her work for the day. It was going to be a busy schedule of patients, and Hope knew that Dr. Harvey relied on her to keep everything in order so no one had to wait too long to see the doctor. Before long, the first patients of the day had arrived, a pair of six-year-old twin boys brought in by their mother, Mrs. Pierce. She wore a dress and makeup as if she were going to church.

“Hey, that’s my train! Mother, he took my train!” one boy shouted.

“Mother, it’s my train! It has my name on it!” the other one cried.

“No, that’s my name!” the first boy yelled, grabbing a small toy train out of the other one’s hands. Hope was thankful for the distraction.

“Boys, I’ll give you a piece of candy after your visit if you wait quietly for the doctor and behave yourselves,” Hope told them. The boys quieted almost immediately.

Mrs. Pierce looked at Hope gratefully. “Thank you.”

Hope gave Mrs. Pierce a clipboard full of forms to fill out while the boys waited, playing quietly with the train and taking turns.

When Mrs. Pierce was finished, she handed the clipboard back to Hope. “Do you mind if I ask a question? It might sound strange.”

“No, go right ahead.” Hope said, taking the forms from the clipboard and making a few notes in the boys’ medical charts so Dr. Harvey would see.

“I heard that there’s a new doctor, a man? Doctor...something with a B?” Mrs. Pierce began, smoothing her hair.

“Yes, Dr. Bennett. He’s Dr. Harvey’s nephew and he’s training with her.” Hope explained.

“Oh, that’s nice. Well, I thought it might be nice for the boys to see him, if he’s available. It’s just...ever since their father died...” Mrs. Pierce smiled at Hope, and with a flash, Hope understood what the woman was asking.

Hope tried to end the conversation. “He’s not here today.”

“Oh.” Mrs. Pierce’s face fell. “I was hoping we could meet him. I just think it would be so good for—for the boys!”

“No,” Hope said bluntly.

“So there’s no way that...” Mrs. Pierce tried again.

Just then, Dr. Harvey came out. “Maxwell and Martin, so lovely to see you! Come on in. Your mom can join us in the exam room, too.”

Mrs. Pierce looked back at Hope with a pleading glance, but Hope simply shook her head. She couldn’t believe the boldness of this woman! She did feel sympathy, as she knew Mrs. Pierce’s husband had died several years ago in a fire. She knew it couldn’t have been easy, raising twin boys all on her own. At the same time, she felt an infuriating sting of jealousy at the thought of Mrs. Pierce and Stephen

getting together.

Hope knew she had no claim to Stephen Bennett, but that didn't stop her from growing red with envy every time that line of thinking crossed her mind for the rest of the morning. She wondered what Mrs. Pierce was talking to Dr. Harvey about while her boys were in the exam room. She also was curious what the doctor would think about her nephew and Mrs. Pierce. Maybe she wanted him to find a woman who already had a family.

Hope thought about asking Dr. Harvey, but she decided that nothing good could come of it. Instead, she scrubbed the entire office top to bottom, including Dr. Harvey and Stephen's office. She lingered in the spot where Stephen's arms and lips had caressed her and imagined what would happen the next time they had a private moment. She knew it was inappropriate for her to have those types of thoughts about Stephen, but she couldn't help herself. He was all she could think about, day or night. She wondered if he thought about her or missed her nearly as much as she missed him.

Hope tried to snap herself to attention. It hadn't even been one day since Dr. Harvey had put her new schedule into action. Hope needed to adjust to the new routine, or she'd be in danger of losing her job. Dr. Harvey appreciated that Hope kept everything in order and knew exactly what was going on in the office at all times. She couldn't afford to be distracted, regardless of how handsome or breathtaking the doctor's nephew was.

After work, Hope went straight home and helped Edna Petunia prepare dinner. She and Martha were both assigned to assist with dinner preparation and cleanup for that evening's meal.

Martha, one of Hope's sweeter sisters, immediately noticed that something was wrong. "You seem quiet tonight, Hope. Is everything okay with you?"

Hope glanced at Edna Petunia through the window. Her adoptive mother was shaking out a tablecloth in the backyard. "I'm fine, I guess."

"What is it?" Martha was perceptive. She knew Hope wasn't being completely truthful.

"Dr. Harvey set a new schedule at her office. And it means..." Hope trailed off.

Martha looked at her gently. "It means what?"

"It means I don't get to work with Stephen Bennett—at all." Hope sighed loudly.

Martha nodded in understanding. "You two seemed to hit it off at Cletus's birthday party. And I've seen you talking to him after services at church."

"I really care for him." Hope couldn't believe she was admitting it

out loud, but Martha only smiled. Hope knew that kind, open-hearted Martha wouldn't judge her for having inappropriate thoughts.

Edna Petunia came back into the kitchen with the tablecloth. "What are you bastards gossiping about?"

Hope froze. She couldn't admit her feelings to Edna Petunia. She was far too embarrassed. She also didn't know how Edna Petunia would react, and she didn't want to find out.

"I was just thinking how delicious your roasted yams will taste, Edna Petunia." Martha quickly covered for her sister. Hope shot her a grateful look.

"Don't just stand there, girls—help me with this crazy thing!" Edna Petunia struggled with the tablecloth. Hope and Martha rushed over to her and each grabbed a corner. Together, the women placed the tablecloth onto the long table where the family ate their meals.

Katie and Theresa skipped into the kitchen. "Hope, I'm so glad you're home!" Katie shouted.

Hope smiled. "That's silly. I'm always home."

"Yeah, but Abner's been telling everyone in town that you were going on a date with him!" Theresa told her.

Hope's jaw dropped. "You can't be serious!"

"Yes, I saw him at the mercantile when I was visiting Ruby," Katie explained. "He's telling everyone that he's been courting you."

"Who's been courting Hope?" Cletus boomed as he entered the room. He set down the thick law book he'd been reading at his place at the head of the table and walked over to Edna Petunia. "There she is, the best part of my day!" Cletus dipped Edna Petunia backwards and kissed her passionately.

Hope shook her head. She hoped Cletus would forget his question, but he just stared expectantly at his adopted daughters.

"Well?" Cletus asked.

"Abner's been telling tales!" Katie squealed.

Cletus seemed amused. "Hope, do you have any sort of interest in this Abner fellow?"

"Absolutely not!" Hope was horrified.

"Even though we haven't raised them since birth, we've raised our bastards better than to go for someone like that, Cletus," Edna Petunia chided as she set a bowl of yams down carefully on the table.

"Hm. Seems to me I need to have a talk with this character, then." Cletus folded his arms.

Katie and Theresa looked at each other and giggled.

"Yes, I think you should," Hope said hotly. "He shouldn't be going around spreading falsehoods about me. You know I'm not one to get too involved in gossip or what people say about me. But I do not want to be associated with him. For starters, he's always finding a new girl

around town to convince to go out with him. He has no moral fiber whatsoever!”

Cletus was surprised. Hope spoke her feelings, of course, but it wasn't often that she made impassioned speeches—and especially not as the family was sitting down to dinner. He wondered if there was a special reason she was getting so angry over this Abner fellow. He knew the young man was simply running his mouth. He didn't care for Abner, either, but there must be something else going on to make Hope so upset. “Okay, honey. I'll speak with him.”

“I should give him a piece of my mind, too.” Edna Petunia sniffed. “Now, that's enough talk of Abner for one evening. Dinner's ready.”

The family bowed their hands and Katie led the evening's prayer. “Thank you, God, for this wonderful food, and for our family. We thank you.”

Soon, everyone was talking and laughing as they passed the food around and enjoyed Edna Petunia's cooking. Hope found herself cheering up and enjoying the conversation with her sisters and adoptive parents. She forgot about all about Abner's lies, Dr. Harvey's new schedule, and the strong, broad shoulders of Dr. Stephen Bennett.

That evening, Hope went to bed a little early so she could read before she fell asleep. She kept a Bible on the small table next to her bed and tried to read a few passages each evening. She tried to clear her head so she could fully absorb the stories.

Downstairs, Edna Petunia and Cletus were sitting in the formal parlor, enjoying a game of checkers, when they heard the doorbell ring.

Edna Petunia looked at the clock. “Who could that be? It's practically nine o'clock.”

Cletus shook his head and stood up. “This had better be important.” He made his way to the front door, and Edna Petunia followed. “Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Standing before them, fidgeting and pacing the length of the porch, was Stephen Bennett. He paused mid-step and turned to face the elderly couple. “Hi, Judge Sanders, Mrs. Sanders. I really apologize for disturbing you so late in the evening. I felt like I couldn't wait another day.”

Cletus sighed and stepped aside to let Stephen in. “I'm assuming this is about one of my daughters. It usually is. Come on in.”

Cletus and Edna Petunia led Stephen back into the formal parlor. Stephen sat down on the sofa and peered nervously at Cletus.

“I expect you'll get to the point, given the time,” Cletus said simply.

“Yes, sir.” Stephen replied. He wrung his hands, took a deep breath, then began his speech, which he'd practiced earlier in the day.

“Judge Sanders, I’m here to ask you for your permission to marry your daughter.”

“Which one?” Edna Petunia cried.

Stephen blushed. “Oh, yes. Hope.”

Edna Petunia tried not to rejoice too openly. She couldn’t wait to tell Iris about this!

Stephen continued. “Working with her at the medical office has made me see what a caring and hard-working person she is. She’s exactly the woman I’d like to spend the rest of my life with. I didn’t realize it before, but my aunt recently changed the schedule at work. Now, we don’t work together at all. Today was one of the longest days of my life because I didn’t see Hope. So I don’t want to delay. I’d like your permission, and then I’d like to ask her properly to marry me.”

Edna Petunia and Cletus looked at one another.

“What do you think, sweet pea?” Cletus asked.

Stephen saw a gleam in Edna Petunia’s eye. “I think it’s acceptable, but on one specific condition.”

Stephen gulped. “What condition would that be?”

“My bastards have a habit of getting married without letting me plan out the details. You can marry Hope as long as I can plan the wedding.” Edna Petunia bared her bright white smile.

Stephen couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “So you think I’m worthy of Hope? I thought...I thought she and Abner were courting!”

Edna Petunia cackled. “That boy wouldn’t know the truth if it smacked him in the face.”

Cletus smiled. “Don’t let him get to you, son. He’s telling tall tales, that’s all.”

Stephen breathed a sigh of relief. “So all you’re asking is that I allow you to plan our wedding? That’s fine with me!”

Edna Petunia shrieked with glee as she stood up and rushed over to Stephen, wrapping her arms around him. Stephen sat there, dazed, as Cletus stood up and offered him a hand of congratulations.

Stephen couldn’t believe that Hope’s parents had agreed to his marriage proposal so easily. Letting Edna Petunia plan a wedding seemed incredibly easy. What could go wrong?

Chapter 9

“O kay, please hold these...yes...and then I’ll grab a few of those...thank you! Straighten up, Stephen, I can barely see the colors in the fabric!” Edna Petunia shouted from across the aisle in the mercantile.

It had been two weeks since Stephen had expressed his intention to marry Hope, and Edna Petunia still hadn’t allowed him to propose to her yet. He regretted his decision to allow Edna Petunia to plan the wedding. He’d had no idea how overboard she would go.

Every waking hour that Stephen wasn’t scheduled at work, he spent with Hope’s adoptive mother—at the mercantile, the church, or any number of other locations where Edna Petunia had arranged wedding-related appointments. Stephen had lost track of all the hats, dresses, shoes, and jewelry Edna Petunia had purchased.

When he’d expressed his concern to Cletus, the older man had only laughed and patted him on the back. “Let Edna Petunia be Edna Petunia. It makes her so happy.”

Each time Stephen mentioned that he felt it was time to propose to Hope, Edna Petunia talked him out of it, saying she needed a little more time. But Stephen was growing restless. It had been two weeks since he and Hope had last worked together, and each night, he fell asleep imagining what it would be like to touch and kiss her again. They had seen each other in church on Sunday, but hadn’t gotten a chance to talk afterwards because the Harvey family didn’t stay after the service.

Now, Stephen was in the middle of the mercantile for the second time that day, laden with bags, boxes, and yards upon yards of lace. He struggled to keep up with Edna Petunia’s pace. She was truly in excellent shape for a woman in her seventies.

“What are you standing there for? We’ve got a lot more to do today!” Edna Petunia barked.

Stephen craned his head to see around all the lace. Edna Petunia was headed for the door. “Don’t we need to pay for all this?”

Ruby, seated at the front of the store by the cash register, smiled and shook her head. “I’ve added it to Edna Petunia and Cletus’s

account.” As Stephen struggled to make his way to the front of the store, Ruby stood up and held the door open for him. “Good luck!” Ruby called after Stephen as he trailed after Edna Petunia. She shook her head. *He must be truly heartsick for Hope to put up with all this.*

Edna Petunia’s next stop was the ice cream parlor. She had convinced the owner to bake a special wedding cake for Hope and Stephen, and she had asked that he prepare a cake now so she would know what it tasted like.

Stephen poked his head out from under the lace and looked at his future mother-in-law. “Edna Petunia, I have a question. Hope told me that you’re a terrific baker. Why aren’t you planning to make the wedding cake yourself?”

Edna Petunia laughed. “That may be true, but this is one of my bastard’s wedding days! I don’t want to be in the kitchen fussing over a cake. On this wedding, I’m relaxed!”

If this is relaxed, Stephen thought, *what is she like when she’s not relaxed?*

The owner of the ice cream parlor, Victor, came out to greet Edna Petunia. Victor beamed. “Edna Petunia! It is a delight to see you. We are so excited to make a cake for Hope and her fiancé.”

“I’m here!” Stephen shouted from beneath the boxes.

Victor looked startled. “Oh my! I didn’t see you there. Hello, son.” Victor offered a hand, and Stephen stuck his right hand out, balancing everything in his left hand. The tower of wedding finery swayed and swayed until Victor helped catch some of it. “Let’s put these down at one of the tables!” Victor and Stephen set all of the boxes, bags, and spools of fabric down on one of the tables.

Edna Petunia admired the rows of ice cream flavors in small barrels. “You know, I wouldn’t mind a little chocolate ice cream before we taste your cakes, Victor!”

Victor smiled widely and went behind the counter to scoop a small dish of ice cream each for Edna Petunia and Stephen.

Edna Petunia dug a peppermint stick out of her bodice and put it on top of the ice cream. “Mm!” Edna Petunia smacked her lips. “Okay, now I’m ready for the cake!”

“I’ll be right back.” Victor walked to the back of the parlor and disappeared into the kitchen.

Stephen took a small bite of ice cream. He had to admit, it was delicious. But he was exhausted and sore from lugging Edna Petunia’s purchases all over town. “Edna Petunia?”

Edna Petunia continued to spoon her ice cream into her mouth. It took her a few moments to realize Stephen was trying to get her attention. “What is it?”

Stephen took a deep breath. “You keep telling me that it’s too soon

to propose to Hope. I want to respect you and Cletus's wishes. But I'm getting impatient. If not now, when will be the right time?"

Edna Petunia grinned at the younger man. He was so earnest! She could tell how much he was in love with Hope, and that made her happy. All she wanted for her bastards was for them to be healthy and happy. She decided to let him in on her secret plan. "In a few weeks, we have the big church dinner coming up. Have you heard about that?"

Stephen looked confused. "What does that have to do with Hope and me?"

"I'm going to decorate the church for it so it looks very festive. With lace and ribbons and anything you might use for a special event—like a wedding. That evening, when Hope arrives at the church, I'll have everything set up for the wedding. You'll propose, she'll accept, and then you'll walk down the aisle!" Edna Petunia clapped her hands together with glee.

Stephen frowned. "But she won't be wearing a wedding dress. How will that work?"

Edna Petunia waved her hands. "Don't worry, Stephen. I've thought of everything..."

Stephen didn't understand and wanted to ask more questions, but Victor came back and triumphantly placed a small, ivory-colored cake in front of them. Frosting in the shape of roses covered the top of the cake. "Now, this is just a small cake to demonstrate. The actual wedding cake will be much bigger!"

Edna Petunia nodded approvingly. "This looks wonderful! Let's dig in!"

Stephen declined a piece of cake after his dish of ice cream, but did think it looked rather tasty. He longed to be able to tell Hope about the details of their upcoming wedding. He didn't know what to do. It was clearly very important to Edna Petunia to handle things her way.

Edna Petunia sighed. "Victor, you are a sinfully good baker! If we both weren't already married, I might have made eyes at you."

Victor blushed.

Stephen sighed. It was going to be another long day of wedding planning, and there was no end in sight.

* * *

WHEN HOPE ARRIVED home from work that evening, she saw Edna Petunia stitching yards and yards of white fabric together. "Are you making curtains?" Hope called as she walked into the formal parlor.

Although the girls usually didn't go into the formal parlor unless invited, Hope thought she'd see if Edna Petunia wanted company.

Hope was dreadfully bored after a slow day in the clinic. There had only been two patients, and though she enjoyed talking to Dr. Harvey, she missed Stephen. She had so many things she wanted to talk to him about, and church wasn't a good opportunity to do so.

Edna Petunia jumped up and began stuffing the fabric behind her on the sofa. "Hope! I didn't hear you come in!"

"Do you need help?" Hope asked.

Edna Petunia thought quickly. "No, no. Why don't you go in the kitchen and help your sisters get ready for dinner? Yes, that's a good idea!"

Hope frowned. "It's not my turn to help with dinner. If you want me to stay here with you while you work on your curtains, I can." She began to sit down on the sofa next to Edna Petunia, but her adoptive mother stood up and pushed her toward the door. Hope realized that the older woman was surprisingly strong.

"No, no, I don't want to trouble you. You go...go read a book! Take a walk! You bastards need more fresh air, I just know it!" Edna Petunia called.

Hope sighed. "All right." She thought for a moment that Edna Petunia was acting strangely, and then she realized that it would be more unusual if Edna Petunia *wasn't* acting strangely.

Hope walked into the informal parlor next. This was the room where she and her sisters liked to spend time after work and chores. Theresa was working on a long, lacy piece of fabric.

"What's that?" Hope asked curiously. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was a wedding veil!"

Theresa looked at Hope with an expression of terror. She quickly stuffed the lace into a small box and slammed the lid shut. "It's nothing!"

"Theresa, you can tell me. You're not getting married, are you?" Hope teased.

Theresa flushed bright red. "No...no one's getting married!"

Hope decided to give Theresa some privacy. She walked toward the kitchen, where she saw Minnie and Alice examining something in a small box.

"It's so beautiful!" Alice exclaimed.

"I heard it's from his mother," Minnie said dreamily.

"Whose mother? I want to see!" Hope called as she walked up to her sisters.

Alice covered her hand with her mouth. "Hope!"

Minnie snapped the lid shut on the small box and hid it behind her back. "It's not your turn to help with dinner."

“I’m well aware of that,” Hope replied, looking from sister to sister. “What were you two looking at?”

Minnie looked at Alice nervously. “Nothing.”

“You’re holding something behind your back, Minnie,” Hope said. It was plain as day.

“N-no I’m not,” Minnie stammered.

“Fine. I give up. If you want to keep secrets, that’s fine with me. I’ll be in my room!” Hope flung her arms in the air and rushed up the stairs. It was official—her entire family was behaving strangely, even for them.

Chapter 10

The weeks dragged on slowly for Hope. Life just wasn't as interesting or exciting as it had been when she and Stephen had been working together. She wanted to ask Dr. Harvey if Stephen ever asked about her, but she didn't want the older doctor to know how strong her feelings were for the young man.

She looked forward to the annual church dinner because she thought Stephen might attend. Sarah Jane and Micah hosted it each year as a thank you to all the parishioners who helped out at the church throughout the year.

Hope also was excited for the food Sarah Jane would prepare. Like Edna Petunia, Sarah Jane was a gifted cook. She could make a mouth-watering meal from leftover ingredients in someone's pantry on a moment's notice.

Hope dressed in a white silk blouse and a navy skirt. She brushed her hair and pinched her cheeks to add a little color to them. She wanted to look her best if Stephen was going to be present. He was used to seeing her in her work clothes, or on Sunday mornings when she barely had any time to make herself look presentable. Tonight would be different.

"Come on, Hope! We're going to be late!" Theresa called from the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm coming!" Hope yelled back. She smoothed her skirt one last time and went downstairs to meet her family. Hope, Theresa, and Edna Petunia went outside and climbed into the wagon, where Cletus waited for them. Minnie, Alice, Martha, Katie, and Hattie were already at the church helping Sarah Jane and Micah set up.

Hope noticed that Cletus was wearing one of his finest suits, and Edna Petunia had selected a dress she hadn't seen her wear before. Even Theresa looked prettier than ever in a ruffled dress and shiny black shoes. She wondered why everyone had suddenly decided to dress up for the church dinner. She had her reasons, of course, but who was everyone else trying to impress?

When they pulled up in front of the church, Cletus told the women he'd drop them off at the side of the church and find a place to park

the wagon.

“Why the side of the church and not the front?” Hope asked.

Edna Petunia and Cletus looked at each other and smiled. “No reason,” Edna Petunia replied.

Hope frowned. Her adoptive parents had been acting peculiar for weeks now, and she hadn’t been able to get to the bottom of it. Her sisters had been strange, too—everyone always seemed to be talking about something that they immediately stopped chattering about as soon as Hope walked into a room. She really needed them to snap out of their moods soon, because they were all getting on her nerves.

As Hope approached the side door, Sarah Jane came out of the church carrying a large pitcher filled with a red liquid.

“Hello, everyone!” Sarah Jane called. “Would anyone like some punch before dinner?” Sarah Jane asked the question as if it were the most natural thing in the world for her to be outside offering her family punch.

Hope wrinkled her brow. “Sarah Jane, why would you offer us punch outside? What is wrong with all—” Hope stopped talking and gasped in horror as Sarah Jane bumped into her, spilling red punch all over Hope’s blouse.

“Oh, no! Look what you’ve done, Sarah Jane.” Edna Petunia’s words were scolding, but Hope was dismayed to find that she wore a big smile on her face.

“I’m so clumsy!” Sarah Jane cried.

“No, you’re not,” Hope pointed out. “You’ve never been clumsy.”

Sarah Jane shrugged. “I don’t know what’s gotten into me, then. I’m so sorry, Hope. Why don’t I take you inside to get changed into one of my shirts?”

“But we’re not the same size. Your shirts aren’t going to look right on me.” Hope was pretty sure Sarah Jane had lost her mind along with the rest of the family.

Sarah Jane just smiled. “I’m sure we can find something...”

Hope sighed and followed Sarah Jane inside the church building. Hope saw a few of her sisters setting the tables in the hall portion of the building, but Sarah Jane steered her to the residence part of the building where she, Micah, and their children lived.

Chrissy, the little girl Sarah Jane and Micah had adopted when they’d first married, was in the residence playing with a few dolls. “Hi, Aunt Hope!”

Hope sat down next to her niece. “Hi, Chrissy!”

“What happened to you? Why aren’t you wearing your lace?” Chrissy asked innocently.

Sarah Jane’s face looked stricken. “Shh!”

Chrissy’s face flushed. “What did I say?”

Hope couldn't stand it anymore. "What lace are you talking about? What's going on in here?"

"You know what...I just remembered Chrissy and I have a very important errand to run!" Sarah Jane grabbed Chrissy's hand and practically dragged her out of the room.

"Wait!" Hope called. "You didn't give me something to wear!"

Sarah Jane didn't respond as they rushed toward the church. Hope exhaled loudly and sank down onto the floor. Just then, she heard a knock on the residence door. Exhausted, confused, and annoyed, she walked over to it and began to open it. To her surprise, the person at the other end quickly slammed it shut again.

"Hello?" Hope called.

"Hope—it's me." Stephen's voice carried into the residence from the other side of the door.

Hope felt a warm wave of relief flow over her. Stephen was here. He'd help her, even if her entire family was behaving horribly. "What are you doing on the other side of the door? I'll let you in."

"No!" Stephen shouted, sounding upset.

Hope didn't understand what the issue was. "Why don't you want to come in?"

"Please, Hope—you're going to need to trust me on this." Stephen took a deep breath. "I promise, it's a good thing. Hope Sanders, ever since the day I first saw you in my aunt's medical office, I knew you were going to be someone special to me. At first, I was a little afraid of you."

Hope smiled as tears welled up in her eyes. "Hey, I thought you said this was a good thing!"

Stephen grinned. He couldn't see her, but he could imagine her lovely face. "I promise you it is, Hope. Like I said, at first, I was a little nervous around you. You were so honest and smart and direct. I worried that I wasn't good enough for you. Heck, I'm still a little worried about that."

"Where are you going with this?" Hope wondered out loud. The church dinner was probably going to start any minute, and it would look bad if the minister's sister-in-law was caught talking to an unmarried man in the private residence—even if there was a wooden door between them.

Stephen laughed. "Oh, Hope. You always get right to the point. It's one of the things I love about you."

Hope's ears perked. "Love?"

"That's right, Hope. All of this—what I'm trying to say is—I love you. I've been in love with you for months now, and all I want is to spend the rest of my days with you. Will you marry me?" Stephen held his breath as he waited for a response.

Hope couldn't believe it. She longed to touch him and kiss him so he could prove that his offer was real. "This door is in my way!" Hope cried in frustration.

"Is that...is that a yes?" Stephen asked nervously.

"Of course it's a yes! Now, open this door!" Hope called. Enough was enough.

Stephen wished he could open the door, but he had been patient for so many weeks that he knew he could hold out for a few more minutes. "I can't do that right now, Hope. There's something else."

"What else could there possibly be? You just proposed to me and I accepted. There's nothing else you could tell me right now that would shock me," Hope reasoned.

Stephen sounded pained. "Hope, I really have to go. I'll see you very soon. Promise. I love you!"

Hope heard his footsteps walking away. *What in the world is going on?*

"Knock-knock!" Edna Petunia's voice called.

"Do you want me to open the door or keep it shut?" Hope grumbled.

"Open it, of course!" Edna Petunia replied.

Hope swung the door open quickly and Edna Petunia stumbled in, carrying what seemed like a huge ball of lace.

Edna Petunia set to work laying it out on the bed carefully, and Hope saw that it was a wedding dress. "Hope, you know how much Cletus and I love you. We're so happy for you and Stephen."

"How did you know about that?" Hope was confused. Stephen had proposed less than five minutes ago. How did Edna Petunia already know?

Edna Petunia looked guilty. "Well, Hope—we've actually been planning your wedding for several weeks now."

"We?" Hope repeated.

"Yes. Stephen, your sisters, Cletus, Dr. Harvey, and me, of course!" Edna Petunia grinned. "I'm sure this is all quite a shock. Peppermint stick?" She pulled one out of her bodice and offered it to Hope.

Hope shook her head wordlessly. "So everyone knew except me?"

Edna Petunia shrugged and began to munch on the peppermint stick. "Now that I've seen eight of my girls married, I know what to be on the lookout for. I've learned. I've seen the way you and Stephen look at each other in church. I knew the moment you were engaged, you'd want to get married immediately! So I decided that as soon as that happened, I'd be ready." Edna Petunia's eyes gleamed as she gestured at the dress. "This is yours."

Hope finally understood why her family had been acting so strangely for the past few weeks. She had known something was going

on! She couldn't be angry, though. She recognized it had all been done out of love. Hope walked over to the bed and ran a finger along the lace bodice of the dress. "It's absolutely stunning. Thank you, Edna Petunia." Hope gave Edna Petunia a hug. "This is wonderful. I can't wait to wear it on my wedding day, whenever that might be."

Edna Petunia cackled. "Luckily for you, you only have to wait about five minutes!"

Hope felt bewildered all over again. "What are you talking about?"

There was another knock at the door. "Come in!" Edna Petunia called. All of Hope's sisters came in, bringing a flurry of activity with them.

"Shoes!"

"Hair!"

"Flowers!"

Hope couldn't keep track of who was doing what, but before she knew it, a gaggle of orphans had buttoned her up into the gorgeous lace dress her family had made for her.

Edna Petunia explained. "Penny did all of the hard work, I just added a few lace panels. That's why I acted so strangely when you came into the formal parlor the other day!"

The orphans busily attended to Hope's hair, helped her into a new pair of white shoes, and gave her a beautiful bouquet of flowers to hold.

Sarah Jane checked the clock on the wall. "I'm sure the men will be waiting for us. Are you ready, Hope?"

Hope looked around at her sisters and adoptive mother, overcome with emotion. She nodded.

When they reached the church, Edna Petunia and her daughters took their seats in the pews and Cletus came up to Hope. "My, my, my. You look absolutely exquisite, my dear." Cletus kissed her cheek. A single tear rolled down his face, and he wiped it away before anyone else would notice. He didn't want people to think he was getting soft in his old age.

"Thank you, Cletus. I'm lucky that I have you and Edna Petunia as an example of a strong marriage. I hope Stephen and I will one day have what you have. Although I don't know if we'll be *exactly* like you two. You *are* pretty strange." Hope smiled at Cletus to let him know she meant well.

Cletus laughed. That was their Hope for you. Always completely honest.

Micah and Stephen were in place at the front of the church, and Jed, Gertrude's husband, began strumming his banjo. Cletus and Hope walked down the aisle to the gentle music.

When they had reached the front of the church, Cletus gave Hope

another kiss on the cheek. "Congratulations, sweetheart." He walked over to Stephen and gripped his hand as hard as he could. "You'd better not do anything in the world to hurt my baby, son. I'll be watching."

Stephen nodded as Cletus released his iron grip. He couldn't believe how stunning Hope looked in her elaborate wedding dress. At this moment, standing in front of the love of his life and her family, as well as his aunt and their community, he realized that all of Edna Petunia's exhausting planning had been worth it.

"I'm sorry, Hope!" Stephen whispered. "This is why I had to stay behind the door. It's bad luck for a groom to see the bride before the wedding."

Hope smiled. "It's okay. It all worked out in time. But I can't believe how long you kept a secret!"

Stephen shook his head solemnly and looked at Edna Petunia. "Trust me, you have no idea what I went through."

Hope laughed. "I can imagine."

Micah cleared his throat. Although Stephen and Hope spoke quietly, they were in front of the entire congregation, and the people were expecting a wedding. "Are you two ready to start?"

Hope and Stephen both nodded. Micah began the ceremony.

Hope gazed out at her family and friends. She still couldn't believe that she was going to spend the rest of her life with Stephen.

Stephen looked into Hope's eyes. He couldn't feel luckier to have met Hope, let alone have the privilege to be her betrothed. Edna Petunia, his aunt Iris, and their families had outdone themselves. The church was overflowing with beautiful green plants and flowers, and each pew had a white ribbon tied to the end of it. Candles filled the front of the church. Stephen had seen a preview of the food and desserts and couldn't wait to enjoy them fully once the ceremony was complete. There was really only one thing that could have made this day better, but he would have to learn to deal with that. His family lived in Seattle. It would have been foolish for him to think they could come.

Micah continued to speak, though he knew no one was really paying attention to him. The parishioners were impressed at the beautiful decorations and the happy couple standing before them. He didn't mind. "If anyone has any reason why this man and this woman should not wed, speak now or—"

Just then, the front doors to the church burst open and slammed against the wall. Two figures rushed into the church wearing cloaks. In the darkness, Hope and Stephen weren't able to make out their faces.

Micah wasn't sure what to do. He didn't recognize the man and

woman who had just interrupted his ceremony, and he wasn't sure how to proceed. He hoped desperately that they didn't actually have a reason to keep Hope and Stephen apart. He knew their love for each other was just as true as the love he had for his own wife, Sarah Jane. "Excuse me—do you have objections to this marriage?" Micah finally managed to stammer.

The couple walked up to the front of the church. Micah could see that they were middle-aged, older than him by at least two decades, but not as old as Edna Petunia and Cletus. They both looked embarrassed.

"We're so sorry to interrupt!" the woman cried out. "Please forgive us. We just couldn't miss this, but our train was late, the wagon we hired broke down and we were covered in mud."

The man looked down at the floor. "All we had to wear that was decent were these cloaks."

As they walked closer to the front of the church, Stephen gasped in recognition. He rushed over to the couple and embraced them. "I can't believe you're here!"

Hyacinth and Lawrence Bennett beamed at how handsome their son looked in his suit.

Hope walked up to them. "What exactly is all this about?" She had thought the surprises were over for the day, but they just kept coming.

"Hope, these are my parents, Hyacinth and Lawrence Bennett. Mom and Dad, may I present to you Hope Sanders, soon to be my wife!" Stephen couldn't have been prouder as he introduced his parents to the love of his life. He knew that he had given them a great deal to worry about with his ordeal before leaving Seattle, and he was glad they could rest assured that he'd found a wonderful young woman to spend the rest of his days with.

Hyacinth embraced Hope warmly. "A pleasure."

Soon, Edna Petunia and Dr. Harvey joined in the embraces as they reunited with the Bennetts.

"Excuse me? Can we continue?" Micah had never lost control of a wedding before, but there was a first time for everything.

"One more thing!" Lawrence exclaimed, and everyone stared at him. He pulled out a sack of flour from his cloak and handed it to Stephen. "Give this to your wife. Trust me." Lawrence winked and sat down.

Stephen, bewildered, thanked his father and then presented the sack to Hope, who was equally confused. "Thank you!" Hope whispered. She passed the sack to Sarah Jane, sitting in the front pew, who gave it to Chrissy to play with.

The Bennett, Sanders, and Harvey families settled into the church pews and calmed down so Micah could resume the ceremony. As he

continued, Hope and Stephen could barely pay attention because they were so excited. Finally, Micah announced the words they had been waiting for.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife!”

Stephen kissed Hope, and she felt that sparkling jolt of electricity that she had craved so badly. As they held hands and stared out at the congregation, Hope felt a beautiful peace settle over her body. A combination of fate and faith had brought her here to this perfect moment, and she knew that there was much more in store for her as a new bride. Though she didn't know all the twists and turns her life would take, she knew she would weather them all with her perfect partner.

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